Domengneaux still stressing classroom French

Last Friday, when he took the microphone to accept the honorary Doctor of Humane Letters bestowed upon him by Loyola University, Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) chairman James Domengeaux talked about the need to teach French in our schools. Since the founding of CODOFIL in 1968 Domengeaux—whose name has been exchanged freely for that of the institution he heads—has talked about the need to teach French in the schools.

In fact, supporting and arranging French classes, while certainly not the extent of CODOFIL's work, have been the most substantive day to day focus of that organization in the decade and a half of its existence. Domengeaux, in choosing to hammer at that subject in his Loyola acceptance speech—an occasion whose clear meaning was to praise and recognize the CODOFIL efforts with which he is identified—has talked about the need to teach French in the schools.

That Domengeaux and CODOFIL have been the subject of controversy over the years of the organization's existence should not be surprising. Domengeaux, ever since he burst onto the scene with his radio speeches and pamphletting aimed at the Huey Long regime of Depression Louisiana, has been a fountain of bold statements that inevitably stir reaction. And one can find on this continent, looking at the Acadians' cousins in Quebec, a ready illustration of how language today retains all its potential as a fuel for nationalistic conflict that it has had throughout the world's history.

Given those two elements, then, what is remarkable is not that CODOFIL has stirred up a little dust, but that it has been able to advance its goals in a relatively calm fashion. Even critics of this or that aspect of CODOFIL—often with very valuable criticisms concerning the choice of source materials for Louisiana French students—are likely quick to allow that there might be little to discuss one way or the other about the fate of French in Louisiana without the spirit of revival of the language that CODOFIL helped to inspire. CODOFIL has managed, especially in pedagogical matters, to seem bigger than the controversy that surrounds it. Ultimately, it might benefit the greatest from its sharpest critics; it's usually the case in arguments over language that the loudest cries are made by those whose commitment is the most intense.

CODOFIL and Domengeaux have the predictable effect of catalyzing hot emotions within the cadre of those deeply involved in Louisiana's French movement, especially among those who would prefer a stronger focus on the indigenous French culture. But to Acadians and the state at large, CODOFIL has been a major vehicle for making us proud once again of our French heritage. We go to CODOFIL to plan trips to France, we call CODOFIL to check how to spell a French word, and we send francophone visitors to CODOFIL for information about...
French in Acadiana. Our children are sometimes taught French by CODOFIL-sponsored teachers—the fact that they are from Belgium or France may be a little unsettling to us, but more and more Louisiana-bred teachers are taking their places—and we celebrate each fall at a Cajun music festival that was founded and nurtured by CODOFIL before being put into the capable hands of the Jaycees.

When he took the podium Friday night, however, Domengeaux did not dwell long on CODGFlL’s accomplishments, the grandest of which has been to lead a restoration of pride in the language. He talked about the need for children to take French classes. He talked of the state Board of Elementary and Secondary Education’s (BESE’s) new guidelines that will require fourth through eighth graders to take a second language.

Successful implementation of those requirements—something not at all assured, in view of the enormity of the task—is an absolute necessity if there is to be a future for French in Louisiana. Whatever the mix of materials that ultimately is used in our classrooms, the language will be lost unless the next generation learns it, and it is most likely to learn it in the classroom. We enjoy a rich treasure of local French culture to make the learning fun and interesting; and our French roots are the source of our compulsion to study the language. But for French to survive here it does, as Domenegeaux tells us, need to be an integral part of the education of our children.