NEW ORLEANS — Mais, cher, beaucoup de monde parle encore francais en Louisiane!
But yes, hon, a lot of people still do speak French in Louisiana!

It's not necessarily Parisian, but more than 261,600 speak a language that is recognizable as the one brought to New Orleans by French nobility and to the bayous by Acadian immigrants, according to Census Bureau figures.

"That's a rather encouraging piece of news," said Marc David, associate to the director of CODOFIL, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana, which was founded 25 years ago to keep French from dying in the state.

The figure is only about 1,500 fewer than the 1980 figure, he said.

"After losing another generation of Francophones — research shows that the older you are the more likely you are to speak French in this state — we have almost the same amount of French speakers in the state. For us, that's very good news."

Louisiana's French heritage — it's also the only state where the law is based on the Code Napoleon rather than on English common law — becomes even more apparent when the figures are compared to national figures.

People who listed their home language as French, Cajun or French Creole make up two-thirds of the 391,994 Louisiana residents who told the Census Bureau that they don't speak English in their homes.

Louisiana residents make up 13.6 percent of the 1.9 million people who speak one of those three French variants around the country.

Those three groups account for 6 percent of the 31.8 million people nationwide who speak a language other than English at home.

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Throughout the 18th and 19th centuries, it was the Cajuns who assimilated other groups. That’s why there are now Cajuns named Schexnaildre (pronounced “SHEX-ny-der”) and Kidder (pronounced “kid-DEHR”).

“It's only in 1916, with the laws that obligated attendance at public schools and which at the same time mandated that the language taught in Louisiana public schools would be English, that you see that trend begin to change,” said David (pronounced “dah-VEED”).

Spanish, listed as the home language of 72,173 Louisiana residents, is No. 2 in Louisiana’s list, with 18.4 percent of the total, but No. 1 nationwide, at 54.4 percent.

Some of them have a Louisiana heritage that goes as far back as the Cajuns. “About the same time the French came to Louisiana in 1765, the Ilenos came from the Canary Islands to St. Bernard,” said Maida Owens, director of the Louisiana Folklife Program. “They had a very similar experience, speaking the language until the last generation. “The older people still speak that Spanish dialect in St. Bernard Parish.”

Most of Louisiana’s French speakers — 227,717 — list their language just as French. But David and Owens say that most of those French speakers are probably speaking Cajun or Creole French.

About 27,600 people listed their language as Cajun, and 6,310 as Creole. “Cajun and Creole are still value-loaded words, so some people may still be reticent about identifying with one or the other,” Owens said.

“There are French in Louisiana who are adamant in saying they are not Cajun. They are very proud of the fact that they are not descended from the Acadians. “The Cajun culture is a blending of all these French cultures. But it doesn’t mean everyone wants to adopt it universally.”

Vietnamese, with 14,352 people speaking it in the home, is the No. 3 language in Louisiana, where many refugees settled so that they could continue their trade as fishermen, but the No. 10 language nationwide. Another 10 languages are spoken at home by 1,000 to 9,000 Louisiana residents: German, 8,588; Italian, 4,933; Chinese, 4,485; Korean, 2,607; Arabic, 2,419; Tagalog, 2,214; Hindi, 1,993; Thai, 1,752; Greek, 1,391; and Japanese, 1,385.

The gumbo of languages spoken in Louisiana includes 98 of the 387 listed nationwide. More than 780 people listed their primary language as Persian. There are 229 Koasati Indians — or, as they are known to outsiders, the Coushatta. There are 126 Gaelic speakers — 91 Irish and 35 Scottish.

Then there are groups so small that they may be just one or two families: three each for Bulgarian, Nepali and Fijian; four for Sebuano, the language spoken on the Philippine island of Sebu; six each for Choctaw and Kusaiean; seven for Romany, the ancient Gypsy language, and eight for Apache.