Special thanks to: Professor Claude-Marie Senninger, French Summer School of New Mexico; Father Albert Schneider, Our Lady of Guadalupe Church; the staff of KKIT; the staff of the New Mexico Humanities Council.

Funded in part by a grant from the New Mexico Humanities Council, an affiliate of the National Endowment for Humanities.

The findings, conclusions, etc. do not necessarily reflect the views of either the NMHC or the NEH.

In Louisiana, as in New Mexico, bilingualism means the struggle of a second local language for survival in the presence of a clearly dominant national language. As in New Mexico, the influence of that second language is obvious even to the most casual observer: place names are French, surnames are French, the foods advertised everywhere and the folk heroes whose names are emblazoned on motels, restaurants and canned goods are French. Bilingualism is pervasive in that southern region which stretches from New Orleans to the Texas border, a region within which French is spoken constantly, in stores, banks, homes, and bars. Much radio and television advertising is in French, and the inclusion of at least some French phrases is de rigueur for political oratory.
As in New Mexico, the roots of bilingualism in Louisiana go back to the earliest European settlement, the establishment of a French colony at the mouth of the Mississippi in the last year of the seventeenth century. When the Louisiana colony was ceded to Spain in 1763, French remained the dominant language. Its position was in fact reinforced during the Spanish period when French-speaking Acadians, exiled from Nova Scotia by the British, began arriving in large numbers, and again in the 1790s when French planters fled Santo Domingo, bringing along their creole-speaking slaves. When Louisiana was purchased by the United States in 1803, French was firmly entrenched along the Gulf Coast.

During the nineteenth century, French retained its position in New Orleans and in the southern parishes (Louisiana has parishes instead of counties). Every European revolution or recession sent Gallic immigrants to the Gulf Coast, especially to New Orleans and the urban centers where, together with the Creoles, the descendants of the early European settlers, they formed an educated elite. So it was in 1815 with Napoleonic exiles, and again in 1830, 1848, 1852, and 1870 with political refugees. In the rural areas, the some 14,000 Acadians of the eighteenth century spread and multiplied, not only because of their extraordinary fertility, but also because of their uncanny talent for absorbing and acculturating other ethnic groups, be they Germans, Spaniards, Bohemians, Irish, or Scots.

Today, however, English has gained the ascendancy in the cities, and bilingualism refers mostly to the rural areas where French has maintained itself in two oral varieties, Cajun and creole. Cajun, as spoken among the Acadians and their assimilated neighbors, resembles the French of New Brunswick. It uses maritime expressions, archaic words, and has borrowed freely from English. Creole, introduced by the Santo Domingo slaves, resembles the dialect of the West Indies and is spoken mostly, though not exclusively, among Blacks. The total number of French speakers is variously estimated from 300,000 to a million and a half. The 1970 census found close to 500,000 whites who claimed French as their mother tongue. (The question was not asked of non-whites.)

Cajun and creole survived in the rural areas because of isolation—geographic, social, economic, and cultural. Persecuted by the English in Canada, despised by the Creole aristocracy in Louisiana, the
Acadians established themselves in the western prairies, swamps, and marshes where nature acted as a protective barrier and where they developed a vigorous, idiosyncratic culture. Moreover, the development of schools was slow until the 1930s. Before that, roads were few and bad so that rural children, white and black, attended school but irregularly. Furthermore, there were no reasons to develop reading and writing skills, and even less English fluency, when one's life would be spent fishing, trapping, or farming among other French speakers. As schools spread, however, well-intentioned teachers, eager to lead their charges into the broader economic and social opportunities of the English-speaking job market, forbade the use of French. Most Cajuns over thirty recall bitterly arriving in first grade with no language but French, and being sent home to write a thousand times, "I will not speak French on the schoolground."

As the oil industry penetrated into South Louisiana, as mechanization and urbanization transformed the way of life, and as job opportunities opened for Cajuns in an English-speaking market, French became transformed from an all-function language to a language of family and play. Speaking an oral language without written reinforcement, Cajuns and creole speakers, forced to use English at work and school, gradually lost command of their mother tongue. Moreover, the campaign of the educators brought fruits: for a whole generation of Cajuns, French was the symbol of economic deprivation and social inferiority. English was the prestige language, and students with thick Cajun accents vigorously denied being French-speaking.

On the other hand, French became associated with a sense of group identity, hence its use in advertising and politics: the public to whom the oratory and the sales pitch are directed usually understands English just as well, but will trust more readily the man who speaks French.

The inroad made by English in the 1930s corresponded to a change in economic and political power institutionalized by the constitution of 1921 which outlawed French. Louisiana seemed on its way to English monolingualism. In the same family one might find grandparents who spoke only French, parents who were bilingual, and children who understood French but spoke only English. The next, inevitable step seemed to be the disappearance of French.

This trend was reversed in 1968 when a Lafayette attorney and former Congressman, James Domengueaux, used his considerable political savvy and influence to push through the Legislature an act creating Codofil, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana. The aim of Codofil is a bilingual south Louisiana where French will be on equal footing with English. The method has been two-pronged: a vigorous propaganda campaign to remove the social stigma attached to French and an educational campaign to have French taught in the schools in grades K through 12.

The first part of the program has been admirably fulfilled. Codofil bumper stickers and posters plastered all over south Louisiana proclaimed slogans such as: "Be proud of your language." Codofil-sponsored conferences which featured native Louisiana Francophones alongside speakers from France, Quebec, Belgium, French-speaking Africa, the West Indies made Cajuns feel that they belonged to a world-wide tradition. Moreover, the time was ripe: the search for roots, cultural as well as racial, had begun. In the space of ten years, attitudes changed radically, and the students who once denied their bilingualism now proudly marshal whatever shreds of French they have picked up from their grandparents.

The educational campaign has been less successful. Because the Codofil program, intended to teach French in grades K through 12, was state-funded, it was impossible to deny participation to north Louisiana school systems whose legislators had voted for Codofil credits. The program, underfunded to begin with, was therefore spread too thinly to be effective.

Because there were few native teachers trained to teach French in the grades, Codofil brought over foreign teachers, mostly from France, Quebec, and Belgium, a situation fraught with problems. The teachers usually come for only one or two years so that the teaching lacks continuity and articulation; they teach, of course, standard French, which is resented in some strongly Cajun or creole communities; not understanding the Louisiana school system (which they find both rigid and overly decentralized), they often clash with administrators—many of whom, moreover, pay only lip service to the program and often deliberately impede the work of the young foreigners.

The foreign teachers were supposed to be a stopgap measure until native teachers could be trained. A Second Language Specialist program (SLS) was instituted to train certified teachers with fluency, or near-fluency, in Louisiana French to read and write a language they already spoke, and to give them a stronger grammatical and lexical foundation. In south Louisiana, where a large pool of native speakers existed, the program worked fairly well. The other Louisiana universities, however, also began SLS programs, and a curriculum designed for fluent speakers was applied without any changes to English monolingual speakers. To make the situation worse, those same universities demanded that the proficiency scores required for SLS certification be
lowered until they became meaningless.

The school boards, on the other hand, while complaining about the foreign teachers, showed no eagerness to replace them because the foreigners are paid considerably less than native teachers. Nor have state appropriations taken into consideration the fact that a program started in kindergarten, then expanded annually to more grades, would need more and more teachers until the thirteen years were staffed.

One can say, therefore, that the ambitious program to teach French in grades K through 12 has been less than successful. Its near failure, however, is more than offset by the overwhelming success of the psychological campaign, the tremendous enthusiasm among the young militants, the rebirth of French literature which has taken place in the last three years, and above all the new sense of pride in the French heritage. One can hope that a grass roots movement will indeed implement one of the Codofil slogans by forcing the schools “to rebuild what they have destroyed,” and to cooperate wholeheartedly in preserving and developing bilingualism in Louisiana.

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