

French Heritage Language Vitality in the United States

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Abstract

Although French is one of the most commonly spoken languages in the United States, speakers of French as a heritage language face multiple challenges in maintaining and transmitting their distinctive French language to future generations, resulting in language loss over time. This article demonstrates the importance of Capacity Development, Opportunity Creation, and Desire in maintaining and revitalizing French as a heritage language in French-speaking communities in Maine, Louisiana, and New York City.

Introduction

French heritage language speakers in the United States face multiple challenges as they attempt to maintain French as a living language, despite the fact that French is one of the most commonly studied foreign languages in the country (second in the list of most common languages offered in elementary and secondary schools after Spanish, and before Latin, German, and Chinese; Rhodes & Pufahl, 2010). The case of French is particularly interesting, because French heritage language speakers represent several distinct geographic populations and different historical circumstances, from recent immigrants to settlements dating back several centuries. Franco-Americans and Acadians in Maine and Cajuns in Louisiana serve as examples of revitalization efforts to protect and encourage the vitality of French as an indigenous language. In New York City, communities of French expatriates and recent Francophone immigrants have collaborated to ensure French maintenance not only as part of their cultural identity but also as a path to academic and economic success and security. In each case, we find communities who offer compelling evidence of the validity of the framework developed by Francois Grin (1990, 2003) and elaborated by Grin and Vaillancourt (2007) and Lo Bianco (2008a, 2008b), who describe the essential roles of Capacity Development, Opportunity Creation, and Desire in efforts to ensure language vitality.

In the historically French-speaking regions of Maine and Louisiana, there have been significant obstacles to French language maintenance, ironically even as French is promoted for English speakers in public schools. In New York, socio-economic factors and the strong need to acquire English skills have discouraged members of the Francophone immigrant community from maintaining and developing proficiency in French. In this article, we discuss the efforts of these diverse French-speaking communities in the United States to maintain French as a language spoken in families, schools, and expanded communities, through formal teaching adapted to heritage speakers, as well as through public policies that have revitalized and encouraged French maintenance in multiple social and economic contexts. These include long-standing Franco-American and Acadian communities in Maine and the Houmas and Cajuns in Louisiana, who have sought to revitalize French after years of neglect and persecution in their local communities. Additionally, we examine the situation of expatriate and immigrant French speakers in New York City who have successfully created dual language programs in public

schools to provide opportunities for their children to maintain and develop French proficiency.

The presence of significant French-speaking communities in the United States is not surprising. French is the fifth most spoken language other than English in the U.S., after Spanish, Chinese, Tagalog, and Vietnamese (U.S. Census Bureau, 2013), and it is widely spoken both in historically French-speaking areas, such as Louisiana and Maine, and in urban settings with increasingly significant French-speaking immigration (Valdman, 2010). Acadian and other French Canadian settlements in Upper New England and upstate New York date back to the eighteenth century, and Louisiana was originally a French colony. These historically French regions have preserved local vernacular varieties of the language and, despite both persecution and limited opportunities, French speakers in these areas have continued to maintain these varieties within families and extended small communities. Thus, French is an interesting example of heritage language vitality not only because of its geographic and historic diversity, but also because it is a language that includes vibrant vernaculars that continue to be recognized under the large umbrella of “Francophonie.”¹

Reacquisition of French in Maine

The French language has had a continuous presence in Maine dating from the earliest short-lived settlement along the St. Croix River in 1604, and growing to over a million French speakers through the years of successive waves of immigration from Canada from the 1890’s through the early twentieth century. The challenges to the vitality of French as a living spoken language can be identified not only in the usual cases of language shift and loss through generations, but also as a result of deliberate anti-French policies. Recent efforts at revitalization make use of the underlying desire to speak the language and continuing efforts to build proficiency in it (capacity building), but there remain difficulties in creating opportunities for the French language to be promoted and used. As Grin and Lo Bianco have argued, the vitality of a heritage language depends on all three of these elements being present and robust within a community.

The complexities of French heritage in Maine reflect four centuries of changing political and economic realities in the state, which still counts robust, though aging, communities of first-language French speakers including Governor Paul LePage, elected in 2010, who is a first-language French speaker from Lewiston and who sometimes used French in his campaign. Maine’s French speakers can be found in roughly two large groupings. In northern Maine’s Upper St. John River Valley, descendants of the Acadian refugees who were expelled from the Canadian Maritime Provinces by the British after 1755 continue to speak French. The U.S.-Canadian border was drawn across that community, so there are French speakers with family ties on both sides. French remains prevalent there and may be heard on street corners and in local restaurants. The proximity of other French speakers (just across the river in Francophone New Brunswick) helps to make French an everyday presence in this region, and recent efforts to promote Acadian cultural events, including plans for an international Acadian Conference in 2014, help create opportunities for heritage speakers to use their French on a regular basis (Price, 2007).

Towns in central and southern Maine were traditional mill towns, where French-Canadian immigrants came to work. About one million people left Quebec between 1830 and 1930 to work

in these textile mills. Strong ties to the Catholic Church and geographical isolation ensured that these small towns preserved French for many years, in spite of a strong Protestant, Nativist, anti-French movement. Until the 1950's or 1960's, when French was outlawed, the "Petit Canada" people of the mill towns attended Catholic schools, which taught in French, and parents worked in the mills, using French on the factory floor and in local shops.

According to the Maine French Task Force, a legislative initiative created in 2011, residents who self-identify as French speakers (Franco-Americans, French Canadians, and French Americans) represent the largest ethnic group in Maine (over 24.9%, even more than the number who self-identify as "English speakers" (Myall, 2012). French as a foreign language is widely offered in Maine's public schools, and private schools also offer French immersion programs. Nonetheless, French, especially its traditional Maine variant, continues to be an endangered language in Maine. Fluent, first-language French speakers are primarily over 55 years of age, and opportunities to use French in public remain limited. In a 2009-2010 state performance report that surveyed school children with limited proficiency in English, French ranked fourth in the list of most commonly spoken home languages in the state, behind Somali, Spanish, and Arabic. Though these numbers are in part a reflection of Maine's increasing diversity, it is also indicative of a shift in the number of children speaking French as a first language at home.

Recent efforts to create opportunities for using French in Maine have included work on overcoming the difficulties created by longstanding anti-French public policies, beginning with a law enacted in 1919 that outlawed the use of French by French speakers in schools (although English speakers were welcome to enroll in French as a foreign language classes). Children were punished for using French, and there was a very active Ku Klux Klan movement against the French in Maine in the 1920's that resulted in driving native French speakers "underground" (Angleini, 2013). Additional pressures came from French teachers themselves, who often discouraged use of Maine's native variety of French. According to Language Revitalization expert Julia Schultz, who works in Maine, "Even today, many French speakers say, 'I don't really speak French,' or 'I speak the wrong French.' They've been made to feel ashamed that their accent isn't 'correct.'" (J. Schulz, personal communication, 2011). Overall, both desire and opportunities to speak French across several generations have suffered a form of linguistic trauma, which many heritage speakers today are trying to address, sometimes painfully, via language revitalization efforts, best described in Ben Levine's documentary *Réveil* (Levine, 2003).²

Thus in Maine, even when there has been French language Capacity Development in the Franco-American and Acadian communities, opportunities both in schools and in public discourse have been so severely restricted that it has been difficult until recently for French-speaking families to transmit French fluency to a new generation. The transmission of French from one generation to another became quite literally "undesirable." Even when French speakers were once again able to take French classes in school, an entire generation of people had told by their French teachers that their French was sub-standard: "Leave your French in the streets of Lewiston where it belongs" (J. Schulz, personal communication, 2011). To this day, many French teachers in Maine's public school system focus on French as a European language and remain unaware of

the many heritage French speakers and communities that surround them. A great deal of work remains to be done in teacher training to overcome the past and prepare for the future.

Consequently, in spite of the development of French language capacity and desire to maintain and develop the language in Maine, creating opportunities for use of French has been a challenge. As Grin and Lo Bianco's framework clearly indicates, all three elements (capacity development, opportunity creation, and desire) must be present to ensure the vitality of a heritage language.³

Nonetheless, there are encouraging examples of efforts to create such opportunities and to encourage French-speaking communities in Maine to re-ignite the desire to transmit the language to a new generation of people who have heard French as children and are eager to revitalize the language in its native Franco-American and Acadian context. There have also been incentives to develop opportunities and expand capacity and desire through legislation. On March 6, 2002 Maine's State Senate passed a joint resolution recognizing Franco-American Day and calling for the annual celebration of "the rich history of the French people in the State of Maine and the United States." Beyond the commemorative effort, the resolution (which was published in French and English) recognized that fluent French-English bilingual people are a cultural and economic resource to the State of Maine and that cultural tourism can be greatly enhanced by the genuine Franco-American centers throughout the State.

Franco-Americans in Maine have contributed much to the beauty and quality of this State... French is the primary language of thousands of Mainers and there has been resurgence in the use of the French language and a heightened appreciation of the Franco-American heritage throughout the State; and clubs and organizations to promote French culture and language have sprung up throughout the State, including the Francophone Caucus at the Capitol (Joint Resolution Recognizing Franco-American Day, 2002). This kind of official recognition continues to be helpful in encouraging the creation of opportunities for use of French.

Another initiative in Maine has been the creation, by the French Heritage Language Program (FHLP), of classes for elementary school children in Lewiston and Augusta. The FHLP is a project of the French American Cultural Exchange (FACE, n.d.), jointly funded by the French government and private U.S.-based foundations and donors. Following the success of the pilot French program "Le Soleil" [the Sun], established in 2011 in two schools in Augusta, the FHLP joined with the University of Maine in Augusta, the Franco-American Heritage Center in Lewiston, and the Centre de la Francophonie des Amériques [Center of Francophony of the Americas] (n.d.) in Quebec to launch an innovative heritage French program in three schools in Augusta and Auburn. The Maine FHLP is based on a curriculum designed to meet the needs of Maine's Franco-American community and aims to bridge the gap between generations by offering the younger generation the opportunity to access, maintain, and transmit their cultural and linguistic heritage; it also aims to promote the diversity of French and Francophone cultures. FHLP is open to every child. At a time when the demand for French instruction is high, the program designers hope that their efforts can serve as a model for other cities in Maine and New England.

Durability of French in Louisiana

Capacity Development, Opportunity Creation, and Desire, when planned for or provided together, become a set of necessary and sufficient conditions for language vitality. The case of French in Louisiana resonates especially well within this framework. The State of Louisiana represents a mosaic of the French-speaking world. French colonists from Canada first settled in the French Territory of Louisiana in 1699; subsequent waves of immigration brought African slaves, followed by 10,000 refugees from the Haitian revolution, and then Acadians, who arrived from the Maritimes of Canada in the late 18th century. These successive waves of French language speakers created 18 groups representing very different linguistic and ethnic backgrounds.

Over two centuries of robust use of French in Louisiana was abruptly disrupted in 1921, with the adoption of a new state constitution that de-institutionalized and de-officialized French throughout the state, making the use of French not only “undesirable” but actually illegal in many circumstances. Heritage speakers lost the opportunity to be educated in French and to go to court in French, along with other rights to use French, thus losing many of the concrete guarantees that had made French a living social language in Louisiana.

This de-officialization and de-institutionalization of French created a legacy of two or three generations of French speakers who were stigmatized by the very fact that they spoke French. As a consequence, they often did not teach French to their children, fearing that they would not master the language of school. The mistaken belief that bilingualism will impede progress in English is also common among recent immigrants. (See, e.g., García, 2009.) As in Maine, opportunities to transmit the language from one generation to the next atrophied as French became increasingly stigmatized and “undesirable.” A major shift began in 1968, encouraged by supportive community leaders, elected representatives, and individuals, broadly known as the “French Movement” (Henry, 1997, p. 183). An important component was legislation in July 1968, creating The Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL), a state agency whose purpose is to represent and meet the cultural and educational needs of all of Louisiana’s French language populations. In its most recent mandate, CODOFIL has two roles: to support the development of French immersion programs in schools across the state and to generate greater socio-cultural economic development in French-speaking communities. These efforts also are made in an attempt to help combat the erosion of French in Louisiana. Language promoters are seeking to extend their work beyond the classroom, so that French becomes useful, visible, audible, and a living language in the community. This goal has required a paradigmatic shift for the many stakeholders in order to enhance the vitality and usefulness of French and to help position French as a tool for Louisiana’s future.

A key aspect of this work has been an effort to both increase opportunities and ignite desire for the everyday use of French. Joseph Dunn, CODOFIL’s executive director, has summarized this effort as follows:

The very first step in promoting the use of any language is to make the conscious choice to speak that language to our children, every day without fail. To know a language, but not speak it, is a conscious choice. If we as speakers of the language, whether we learned it in school or our ancestors spoke it, want the language to survive, it's our personal responsibility to speak it (Dunn, 2011).

French language promoters like Dunn seek not only to increase the number of French immersion schools so that students can learn French but also to provide real-life opportunities to speak it outside of school.

We think that it is only by creating products and projects that we are going to get to the point where we have our young people becoming not French teachers, but also French mechanics, French doctors, French healthcare workers, and other kinds of professionals. These opportunities need to be incentivized. (Dunn, 2011).

CODOFIL thus sees its role not only as promoting linguistic abilities but also as enhancing language choices, as French offers increased economic opportunities for Louisiana French speakers. For example, because French has not been the language of instruction in schools since 1921, a majority of Louisiana French speakers have not developed literacy in French, and therefore there was no consumer market for French language publications. With a growing network of 30 immersion schools educating thousands of young students each year who speak, read, and write French, there is a growing economic incentive for developing this market. Centenary College in Shreveport, which has one of the most dynamic French programs in Louisiana, is now republishing Louisiana literature written in French in the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries.⁴ Centenary College is also publishing the work of new Francophone authors in Louisiana.

Public use of French has also extended to the new Louisiana license plate conceived by CODOFIL. Designed by the late Cajun cultural preservationist, Richard Guidry, and French immersion educator, Nicole Boudreaux, the plate features a Louisiana landscape with the words *Chez Nous Autres* (Cajun French for "our home") and the fleur de lis shape of the Louisiana Iris with its French name *la glaie bleue*. Even the state's name is written in French (Louisiane in place of Louisiana). Louisiana State Senator Eric LaFleur (Dist 28, Ville Platte), made sure it was understood that Louisiana law recognizes French as an official language and that the plate is legal and appropriate.

New Populations of French Speakers in New York City

The principles established by Lo Bianco (2008) and others, that promoting heritage language learning benefits all learners, have resonated particularly well in the context of New York City's French-speaking communities, where parents from diverse backgrounds and ethnic communities have become builders of opportunities and desire for their children. These include European and Canadian expatriates in Manhattan and West Brooklyn, West Africans in Harlem and the Bronx, Haitians in East Queens and East Brooklyn, and North Africans in West Queens. This diversity

in national origins, ethnicity, and socioeconomic status makes the French case in New York City unique (Ross & Jaumont, 2012). The success of these efforts to bring French bilingual education to this wide-ranging population is due in part to collaborations among multiple partners from different socioeconomic, racial, and ethnic backgrounds, including government agencies and parent organizations.

While affluent French expatriates in an urban center such as New York City have generally been served by private French schools offering bilingual curricula, recent immigrants from West Africa and Haiti have had little access to such private schools. These recent immigrants represent a significantly increased Francophone presence in New York, although their knowledge of French remains largely hidden in official statistics. Combined with a significant demand from French expatriate families for access to bilingual French programs in public elementary and middle schools, these newer French-speaking communities have helped to mobilize support for bilingual school programs in French and English, which are essential to the long-term vitality of the French language in these communities. Again we note that Grin's model resonates well as the desire of diverse French-speaking communities have helped to develop capacity and expanded educational opportunities for French speakers.

Parent associations have been of critical importance in promoting French heritage language support and generating the larger community and government support necessary to sustain innovative programs in public schools. Education Française à New York (EFNY) (n.d.) provides an example of the significant role of parents in such processes. Responding to grassroots organizing by French expatriate families in Brooklyn, EFNY began by offering after-school classes in neighborhood public schools under the supervision of volunteers. Their goal was to share the French language with their children and to offer financially feasible options for educating their children in French. Classroom space for these programs has been offered at no cost by public schools, which then benefit from the expanded after-school offerings that often include non-EFNY parents. These factors -- the organization of EFNY parents and volunteers, free classroom space, and funding from tuition, French government grants, and fundraising-- allow the after-school program to keep operational costs relatively low. These programs serve about 250 students, the majority of whom are French citizens or of French-speaking origin.

This initiative has also helped EFNY introduce full-time French dual language programs in several elementary schools in New York. The programs were developed not only to serve the French families who had initiated the EFNY project, but also to meet the needs of a growing number of Francophone immigrant children who are emergent bilinguals in French and English. These programs in French and English are geared toward Francophone, Anglophone, and French-English bilingual students, as well as students who speak little or no English. Each school oversees its own enrollment. These dual-language programs serve close to 1,000 students, including numerous English language learners, and are expected to serve 1,200 students in the next five years. The schools with dual language bilingual programs are PS 58 in Carroll Gardens, Brooklyn; PS 84 in the Upper West Side; PS 20 in Clinton Hill, Brooklyn; PS 133 in Park Slope, Brooklyn; and PS 110 in Greenpoint, Brooklyn. Two middle schools, MS51 in Park Slope and MS256 in the Upper West Side, started a French-English program since September, 2013.

This “French bilingual revolution” (Ross & Jaumont, 2012) led to the creation of numerous school programs, including the New York French-American Charter School (NYFACS), which opened its doors in central Harlem in September 2010. NYFACS follows a dual immersion program model, offering a bilingual and multicultural curriculum. The school enrolls 300 students in grades K to 5, with plans to teach students through grade twelve. NYFACS serves a diverse group of students with home languages that reflect Community School District 5: 20% French; 40% English; 10% Spanish; and 30% from bilingual homes in which languages are spoken such as French, English, Haitian Creole, Wolof, Bambara, and other West African languages (New York French-American Charter School, n.d.).

A further initiative to increase French language educational opportunities is the French Heritage Language Program, created in 2005 through a public-private partnership. This program offers linguistic and cultural enrichment while facilitating English language acquisition by students of Francophone origin studying in New York City public schools. The program's main objective is to sustain and build French language capacity for these students, helping them keep a connection to their respective cultures, while increasing their opportunities for success in their new environment. The program has served hundreds of students in public high schools and in community centers.

The Internationals Network for Public Schools (INPS), which serves new immigrants who are English language learners, was the first to launch the French Heritage Language Program in five high schools, initially as an after-school option. Some INPS students are refugees from African countries, such as the Democratic Republic of Congo, Guinea, and the Ivory Coast, whose education has been interrupted by war. These students strive to acquire basic literacy skills in their home languages as well as in French, which according to INPS staff will facilitate their learning of English. A survey conducted in 2005 of students and staff from these high schools sheds light on the importance of such a program for students. Many students believed they were “losing” their French or having trouble acquiring higher-level linguistic skills that would allow them to succeed in a French-speaking environment. Many students expressed their desire to return to their home country in the future. All hoped to pursue French language studies after high school (Transcript of meeting with Manhattan International School students, New York, April 10, 2005). French proficiency can be a major asset for students who wish to continue their studies in Quebec, France, or in their French-speaking homelands, including Senegal, Mali, or Haiti.

The diversity of partners and networks involved in French heritage language efforts in New York City has resulted in increased sustainability and appropriateness of support for Francophone students. The growing number of initiatives offered to French heritage speakers in public schools is a considerable accomplishment given the widespread decline in the availability of foreign language instruction in elementary and middle schools nationwide and especially in schools serving families with lower socioeconomic status (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2010). In general, the gap in the availability of foreign language instruction has widened between rich and poor; a large number of elementary and middle school students in rural and lower socioeconomic status schools do not receive any instruction in languages other than English (Rhodes & Pufahl, 2010).

Conclusion

We believe that the essential components of the COD framework developed by Grin and elaborated by Grin and Lo Bianco offer the potential to help researchers understand the vitality of a range of languages and develop strategies for promoting language maintenance and development. In this paper we have examined how capacity development involves both language proficiency and language use in heritage French communities, through formal teaching and informal transmission of the language. We also have explored language use opportunities implemented by various groups: Franco-Americans and Acadians of Maine; Cajuns and Houma of Louisiana; and Haitians, West Africans, and French in New York City. We documented and described the language use opportunities initiated by these heritage language speakers. Finally, we discuss the desire to learn in the context of heritage French communities and examine the strategies used by French language promoters to foster desire. We demonstrate that the dynamic interaction of all three elements helps ensure the vitality in these three diverse geographic areas of the United States. Furthermore, in order to build capacity and create opportunities, French heritage programs in Maine, Louisiana and New York, have required a solid tri-partite partnership — strong commitment from the schools, qualified teachers who understand the needs of heritage speakers, and ceaseless involvement from the parents at all levels. French-speaking parents from a variety of backgrounds and ethnic communities have become builders of opportunities for their children to develop their capacities in French. Thus, from the collaboration of various governmental and nongovernmental partners, including local, national, and international organizations, private foundations, parent groups, education officials, and scholars, has emerged a rich landscape of opportunities for French heritage speakers in parts of the United States. —

We hope that this article succeeds in further underlining the crucial role played by heritage language teaching and learning in our schools and universities and that it inspires people to see cultural and linguistic diversity as a support system for language maintenance and development. Finally, an examination of heritage language vitality is an appropriate occasion to remind ourselves of the fundamental importance of preserving and defending the humanities in education. They offer opportunities for students to better understand our world and are the ingredients of our social cohesion.

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Notes

1. International Organisation of La Francophonie (IOF) (n.d.), which includes 56 nations where French is the official language and an additional 19 with “observer status,” where French is widely spoken.
2. This sentiment of guilt was a long-standing phenomenon, often entertained by Catholic instructors, who did not tolerate “regional” French.
3. Unlike Louisiana, the Francophones of Maine have failed to establish a CODOFINE (Council for the Development of French in New England) (parallel to CODOFIL). A less ambitious version, ActFANE, never succeeded in reinstitutionalizing a revival movement. See later discussion of French in Louisiana.
4. For example, “Les Cenelles,” (Lanusse, 1845) , a collection of poems, is part of a literary movement led by Afro-Creoles in New Orleans, in French, that predates the Harlem Renaissance by nearly 100 years.