Language revitalization on social media: Ten years in the Louisiana Creole Virtual Classroom

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ABSTRACT

Social media has long been recognized as an important domain for the maintenance of endangered and minoritized languages, as well as a platform for language activism. Based on a decade of participant observation in the Louisiana Creole Virtual Classroom, a revitalization community based on Facebook, this paper describes how speakers and learners of minoritized and endangered languages can form online communities for activism, resource development, learning, and teaching. Louisiana Creole is critically endangered and has received little to no institutional support. Meanwhile, the Virtual Classroom has succeeded in creating a large number of new speakers through peer-mediated learning and the creation of learning resources. The orthography developed in the Virtual Classroom has now achieved widespread acceptance, as has the glossonym *Kouri-Vini*. Both are leveraged for the purposes of language making. The Virtual Classroom has given rise to an enduring revitalization movement with implications extending far beyond social media. Indeed, as this paper argues, scholars and practitioners should be cautious not to view online revitalization through a dichotomous lens which induces an artificial separation between the online and the offline. Online language revitalization, like its offline counterpart, is underpinned by language-ideological concerns which are evident in many of the shared practices of the Virtual Classroom.

TI TÈKS

Moun sèy chinbo yê langaj-yé vivan avèk plas latwal. Ça donn yé in plas pou særvi é bat pou yê langaj minm si l'ape mouri. Dan papyé-çila, mo parl apré 10 zan dan group pratik dan Facebook yé pèl Laklas Latwal pou Kréyòl Lalwizyann. Avèk in group konm çala, moun kapab montré ou aprènn in langaj k'apé mouri, fé résous pou li, é bat pou li dan lafær politik. Na pa bokou moun ki stìl parl kréyòl en Lalwizyann é gouværnmen Léta-la fé pa gran shòj pou édé li gohèd. Mé dan group pratik Laklas Latwal, moun fé in bon djòb apé édé ènn-é-lòt aprènn é fé résous pou langaj-la. Na in ta d moun k'apé særvi Lotograf yé fé é ki komensé pélé langaj-la *Kouri-Vini* pou di kréyòl çé in langaj é pa jish "fransé kasé." Tou ça ç'apé shanjé komen moun parl é jonng apré kréyòl, é ça y'apé fé çé pa jish kishòj pou latwal nonpli. Ina pa vrémen in diférans ent ça no fé dan latwal é ça no fé dan dòt plas paske astœr latwal-la fé parti nô lavi. Ça fé, toukishòj politik ki impòrtan kan no sèy chinbo in langaj vivan, çé impòrtan kan no fé ça dan in group latwal itou. Dan papyé-çila, mo sèy spliké kòfær é komen tou ça çé impòrtan.

1. INTRODUCTION

This paper draws on a decade of participant observation in a language revitalization community based on Facebook, the Louisiana Creole Virtual Classroom (hereafter LCVC), to describe in detail how speakers and learners of minoritized and endangered languages can form online communities for language activism, resource development, learning, and teaching. Louisiana Creole (LC) is critically endangered French-lexifier Creole language spoken mostly in South Louisiana, USA. The language has received little to no support from the state government and has been neglected in the region's few language policy and planning efforts focused on French. Meanwhile, the LCVC has attracted hundreds of learners, some of whom have acquired the language to fluency without ever having interacted face-to-face with other speakers. Some learners have even started to teach their children. Members of the LCVC have created their own orthography, dictionary, curricula, a fully illustrated learner's guide to the language, and countless graphics and internet memes. These online creations have gradually 'trickled offline', a process which has been ongoing for the past decade but has most recently accelerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. Resources and discourses from the LCVC reach even elderly native speakers, marking a watershed in the history of the language.

Against a background of work on the sociology and psychology of the internet, this article demonstrates not only how the LCVC and other such communities are multifaceted, vibrant domains for language use in their own right but also that their influence extends beyond the internet, holding the potential for a tangible impact on language vitality. Indeed, as this paper argues, scholars and practitioners of language revitalization should be cautious not to view social media through a dichotomous lens where the offline and online worlds are separate. Online language revitalization, like its offline counterpart, is underpinned chiefly by language-ideological concerns. Indeed, social media offers an especially potent set of strategies for furthering the ideological aims of a language movement.

I begin in this section by reviewing some prior work on the role of the internet in language revitalization, emphasizing the rise of the social web. I then set out what is at stake in the revitalization of LC, adopting a critical perspective (Costa 2017). Section 2 outlines the methodological underpinnings of connective ethnography, an approach which allows a more detailed understanding of the inner workings and concerns of online revitalization communities than has so far been afforded by the literature. On this basis, in Sections 3, 4, and 5 I present findings from my decade-long participant observation in the LCVC, showing how this online revitalization community is structured around the practices of teaching, learning, resource creation, and activism. The review of these practices clarifies that social media is yet another domain in which revitalization movements can articulate their language-ideological struggles.

1.1. LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION AND SOCIAL MEDIA

Early work remarked that the internet provided revitalization movements with the opportunity to create their own online projects, for example webpages to promote and teach their languages (see Buszard-Welcher 2001). These resources mostly constituted static webpages with text and limited audiovisual elements. Today, in the age of Web 2.0, such content can be fairly elaborate, allowing the user to interact with an array of audiovisual content, animations, games, quizzes, etc. Arguably the most significant development of Web 2.0 has been the rise of the social web over the past decade, which has led to entirely new domains for the maintenance and discussion of minoritized languages. Early on in studies of endangered languages and the internet, Holton (2011: 391) suggested that social media in particular would offer the most potential for revitalization.

Perhaps social media's greatest potential lies in its capacity to bring together language activists, native speakers, new speakers, learners, community stakeholders, linguists, and many other parties in metalinguistic communities focused on language revitalization (Avineri 2017; see also Duane 2018). A number of studies have provided a broad perspective on these communities, for example by surveying attitudes (Belmar 2020), orthographic practices (Wendte 2019), and especially language use (Belmar & Glass 2019; Belmar & Heyen 2021; Cunliffe et al. 2013; Honeycutt & Cunliffe 2010; Jones & Uribe-Jongbloed 2013; Williams 2013). The bulk of detailed work has

focused on Western European languages with institutional support e.g., Welsh (Cunliffe et al. 2013), Aragonese (Belmar 2020), Catalan (Duarte 2018), and Frisian (Belmar & Heyen 2021). A smaller number of qualitative studies examining Indigenous languages has been successful in identifying some specific implications for those contexts. Cru's study of Yucatec Maya on Facebook finds that social media can provide horizontal structures for non-standard language use in a context which otherwise favors top-down, institutional interventions (Cru 2015; see also Stern 2017). Social media is also an important setting for language activism and debates on issues such as orthography (De Korne 2021: 178–84).

Although the advantages offered by social media to minoritized language communities are by now well known, what has yet to be elaborated in detail is what online communities are like *on the inside*: how such a community comes into being, how its members teach and learn their language, and the extent to which these efforts might impact real-world language vitality. The ethnography presented here engages with these questions through a critical lens. Rather than asking *if* (or even *how*) social media might save endangered languages, I emphasize that social media acts as yet another context for the elaboration and contestation of the language-ideological concerns which underlie language revitalization movements (see Duchêne & Heller 2007). In other words, social media not only constitutes a domain for language *use* but also a site for discourses concerning language *usage,* that is, the prescriptive regulation of linguistic norms. This perspective, which has so far been lacking in studies of online revitalization communities (but see Duane 2018), draws on the understanding that "struggles over language actually are not centrally about language at all" (Heller 2004: 285). This critical view of language revitalization movements is in my view best laid out by Costa (2017), who analyzes revitalization as leveraging the totemic function of language in articulating broader social struggles: language revitalization concerns "people coming together to act in the world, people articulating opinions about how society should be ordered and about who should take part in that order" (Costa 2017: 4).

1.2. LANGUAGE-IDEOLOGICAL ISSUES IN THE REVITALIZATION OF LOUISIANA CREOLE

LC is a French-lexifier Creole which originated in Louisiana (see Klingler 2003, Ch. 2) and today is likely spoken by no more than 6,000 people (Mayeux 2019: 59). Typical speakers are bilingual in English, elderly, and have not passed LC on to their (grand)children (Klinger & Neumann-Holzschuh 2013). Louisiana French (hereafter LF) is a set of dialects mostly derived from the leveling of several regional varieties of French imported by settler-colonists with a limited contribution from Acadian refugees (Klinger 2009; Neumann-Holzschuh 2014). Both languages are spoken by those who identify as Black, White, Creole, Cajun, Creole of Color, African American, American Indian, Native American, and various combinations of the aforementioned labels (Dajko 2012; Domínguez 1986; Jolivette 2007; Landry 2016a; Wendte 2020).

French, broadly construed, has been the sole focus of top-down revival efforts in Louisiana which have mostly been conducted through a state agency, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL). In practice, most efforts have focused on Standard French rather than LF, owing to the social and economic prestige of the former and the lack of resources for the latter. LC has received even less attention. The reasons for LC's exclusion are complex but have much to do with an association between that language and Blackness. Racist epithets have commonly been used to describe LC, e.g., "Black French" or "n***** French". Relatedly, in common with other French-lexifier Creole languages, LC is often viewed as a "broken" or otherwise deficient version of French (see also DeGraff 2003).

This is further complicated by the rise of Cajun Pride, which began soon after the 1964 Civil Rights Act and saw Louisiana branded as the home of the Cajuns. The Cajun movement was closely tied to the establishment of CODOFIL in 1968 (Natsis 1999). Cajun identity is typically only claimed by Whites, excluding People of Color from this ethnolinguistic movement: many argue that the branding of Louisiana as Cajun rather than Creole—an ethnic label which had been used across racial lines—must be interpreted as a strategy to ensure White identity for the region at a time when racial integration was still being resisted (Giancarlo 2018; Esman 1983; Trépanier 1991).

This process of erasure (Irvine & Gal 2000) was compounded by language labeling practices: glossonyms *Cajun French*, *Creole French* and various other permutations came to be applied to LC and LF based largely on ethnic identification (Dajko 2012). This phenomenon has been termed "ethnoglossic isomorphism" (Wendte 2018). For example, a Cajun who speaks LC may call their language *Cajun French*, while a Creole who speaks LC may call the same language *Creole French*. While CODOFIL focused on French and Cajun identity, local activist groups such as CREOLE, Inc. were founded by self-identified Black Creoles and Creoles of Color. Their linguistic activism focused on *Creole French*, but ethnoglossic isomorphism resulted in ambiguity as to whether this referred to LC or LF.

LC has thus never been recognized as a legitimate language in its own right, an issue core to the concerns of the contemporary revitalization movement established by members of the LCVC. This paper documents the movement's ongoing project of language making (Krämer et al. 2022). As will be shown in Section 4, this draws heavily on the language-ideological process of differentiation (Irvine & Gal 2000). Constructing LC as a legitimate language in its own right primarily involves contesting ideologies that position LC as "broken" LF. A related concern involves counteracting the confusion of LC with other languages bearing the "creole" designation (e.g., Haitian Creole). The LCVC's adoption of the glossonym *Kouri-Vini* (KV), to be discussed in Section 4, accomplishes the differentiation of LC from both LF and other creole languages. Underlying these linguistic struggles is an effort to reconstruct *Creole* as an ethnic label, counteracting the Cajun movement's foregrounding of White LF-speakers (see Mayeux 2022; Wendte 2022).

2. AN ETHNOGRAPHIC APPROACH TO ONLINE LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION COMMUNITIES

Ethnography is widely employed in studies of language-based social movements, and researchers acting as participant observers have contributed to the fast-growing literature on language activism (Costa 2017; De Korne 2021; Dobrin & Schwartz 2016; Dołowy-Rybińska 2020; Hornsby 2015; Nevins 2013; Puchowski 2022). In her seminal *Virtual Ethnography*, Hine (2000) called on researchers to explore ways in which the ethnographic approach can lend itself to research in the virtual world. Hine (2000) specifically formulates her text not to be a methodological primer in web-based ethnography, but instead a foray into what was—and, indeed, is still—an emerging practice. Hine (2000: 12–13) reminds us that ethnographic methodology is "inseparable from the contexts in which it is employed [...] an adaptive approach which thrives on reflexivity about method". One particularly important development has been the deconstruction of longstanding dichotomies between the online and the offline through *connective* ethnography, which encompasses "a stance or orientation to Internet-related research that considers connections and relations as normative social practices and Internet social spaces as complexly connected to other social spaces" (Leander 2008: 37).

Geertz (1998) famously used the term "deep hanging out" to describe participant observation of communities. Over the past ten years of "deep hanging out" in the LCVC, my own technique has been to take notes, screenshots, diary entries, voice notes and other records to collate as needed. This process has had no endpoint and rather represents an ongoing, reflexive process of participant observation in the community which is here presented through a combination of approaches and tools. This article draws on these records and memories, but also on informal interviews with key members and extracts from interactions in the LCVC. This ethnography is broadly sociocultural in its approach to teaching and learning, which are understood as social practices which emerge through interactions between participants (Vygotsky 1978).

Viewing language revitalization through a connective ethnographic lens entails confronting an "observer's paradox" whereby linguists studying these contexts inevitably become involved (see Austin & Sallabank 2018: 208; Labov 1972: 209). Participant observation directly acknowledges this inevitability and therefore is particularly suited to linguist-community collaboration (Dobrin & Schwartz 2016).

Like other researchers in such contexts, I have found it difficult to demarcate my personal and professional identities (Dołowy-Rybińska 2020: 329; Sallabank 2013). I first joined the LCVC in

2011 to learn about my own heritage before I had any notion of conducting research. When I did begin my study, I did so with naïve pretentions to neutrality. Over years of participation in the LCVC and its projects, I have become convinced that my role was never to observe from a mythical view from nowhere, nor to offer linguistic expertise. Instead, it has been enjoyable and educative for me to *participate* in the activities of the revitalization movement while *observing* its trajectory. I maintain friendly personal relationships with people mentioned in this article and am conscious that they will be amongst its first readers. Given the high language-ideological stakes discussed in Sections 3 and 4, it has at times been difficult for me to balance critique against my desire not to offend or ostracize myself from my friends and colleagues in the LCVC. The blurred boundaries between my personal and professional relationships will be evidenced throughout this article and constitute an important limitation.

Privacy and ethics remain a longstanding challenge in online participant observation (see also Garcia et al. 2009). My research in the LCVC began formally in 2013 as an undergraduate research project at SOAS, University of London and was bound by the SOAS Research Ethics Policy. I received approval for further work in the LCVC as part of my postgraduate research at the University of Cambridge in 2014 and 2016. At that time, the LCVC was a public Facebook group, i.e., accessible to anyone browsing the web, and the University's ethics protocol treated this data as public domain. I felt strongly then, as I do now, that this "public" designation did not capture the LCVC's tight-knit community. Like a traditional classroom, the LCVC is perceived by its members as a (semi-)private, bounded space. I therefore decided to adhere to the community's own perception of privacy and norms for the distribution of potentially personal information, influenced especially by Nissenbaum's (2010) work on "privacy in context". This approach falls in line with ethical guidelines for ethnographic research on Facebook which were only just emerging when I began this project in 2013 (see AAA Committee on Ethics 2013; SACHRP 2013). By now, consensus has emerged that online ethnographers must take heed of "the difference between the ascribed and actual beliefs about social media users regarding the need for permission in the research-related use of the information they share online" (Kozinets 2019: 172).

To achieve this, at various stages in this research, I sought permissions from the LCVC administrators and made posts announcing my ongoing participant observation to new and old group members (following Kozinets 2019: 198). As I continued this and other research on LC, I became known in the LCVC as having both personal and academic involvement with the revitalization movement. For the publication in this paper, consent has been sought to quote Facebook posts or comments from the individuals featured, who are assigned pseudonyms. The LCVC's founder, Christophe Landry, will emerge as a key player in the following pages and has given permission for his name to appear. Landry and the LCVC administrators reviewed drafts of this paper and encouraged me to publish it, stating that they are keen to have a record of their activities.

3. INSIDE THE LOUISIANA CREOLE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

Like many other virtual communities, the LCVC can appropriately be described as a community of practice: a community centered around the domain of revitalizing LC through shared and overlapping practices of teaching, learning, and activism (Wenger 1998, 2002). A useful refinement of this concept is Avineri's *metalinguistic community*. Metalinguistic communities are formed through the collaborative elaboration of language practices and ideologies and constitute "communities of positioned social actors shaped by practices that view language as an object" (Avineri 2017: 175).

Based entirely on Facebook, the LCVC constitutes a fairly typical case of the emergence of a virtual community of practice. Lysloff (2003: 256) describes how virtual communities are constructed through "a collective and ongoing performative practice of group representation (to itself and others)." The LCVC is a Facebook Group, "a place to connect, learn and share with people who have similar interests" (Facebook 2023). Once users join a Facebook Group they are referred to as "members" and see fellow members' profiles listed alongside their own. In such a way, the Facebook interface fosters a visual experience of groupness within which group membership can be continuously performed and constructed (Androutsopoulos 2015; van Dijck 2013).

The LCVC had 394 members at the time of writing. The number of members has been tightly regulated in an effort to ensure a small number of active members (see Section 3.3). Figure 1 shows levels of activity in the LCVC over a one-year period. Around 50–100 people constitute a stable core of active members (for similar examples, see Wenger 2002: 56–58). Of these, a smaller group make up the *Facilitators*, a group of advanced learners which has gradually grown over the years to around 10 individuals who share responsibility for many aspects of the LCVC's daily administration and teaching. In their Facebook group, the banner reads: *prémyé jénérasyon-la/mèt langaj kréyòl* ('The first generation of Creole language teachers').
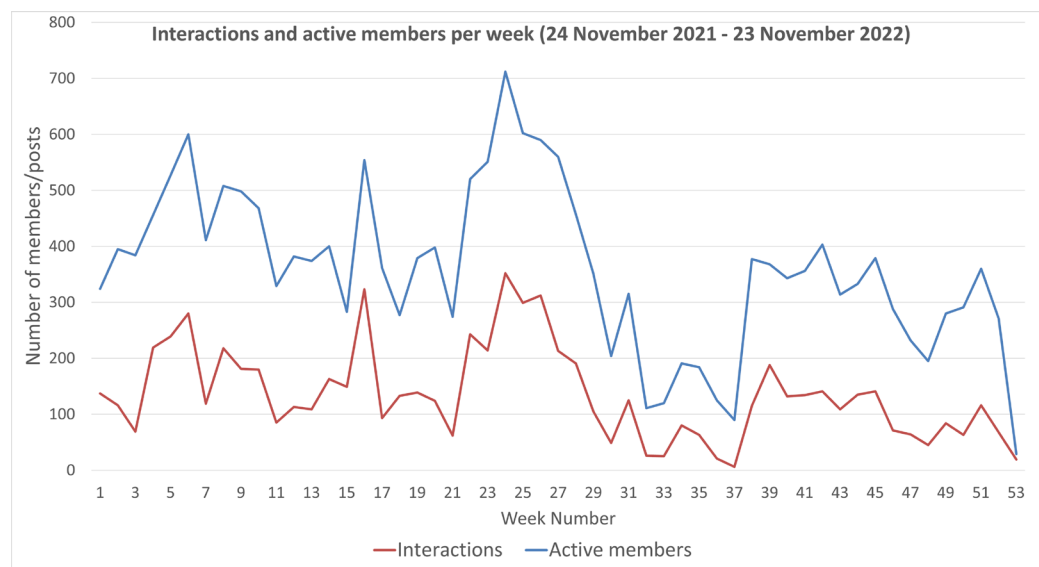
3.1. SOCIAL LEARNING ON SOCIAL MEDIA

Although not consciously grounded in any explicit pedagogical approach, the process of peer-mediated learning which has been so successful in the LCVC can be appropriately described as a kind of situated learning (Lave & Wenger 1991). The online context has long been understood to facilitate language acquisition where peer mediation is co-constructed through interaction (Harrison & Thomas 2009). Stern (2017) finds that peer pressure and peer modelling are key factors in encouraging language use in a Facebook group for Balinese (see also Cru 2015).

In the LCVC, co-construction of the learning community takes place through structured interaction between different participants. The Facilitators act as mentors for new members (see Wenger 2002: 108), correcting language usage and setting language production and comprehension tasks. It is through this kind of sustained social dialogue with more knowledgeable mediators that learners are able to progress (see Vygotsky 1978). At the periphery of the LCVC are new learners, most of whom join via word of mouth or through public recruitment drives (conducted via a public-facing *Fanpage*, see Section 4). The integration of new members into the LCVC is an important process which relies on a combination of initiative from the new recruit and input from Landry, the Facilitators, and other learners. Members of the group soon move from the peripheries towards the core by participating in activities, asking questions, or consistently posting in order to receive corrections. These actions receive praise from other group members: displays of ongoing commitment to learning the language could be said to result in a gradual accrual of status in the eyes of the other members. The status of "advanced learner" may be given to individuals not only as a result of language ability, but also through demonstrated willingness to share in the collaborative practice of the community. This designation can then be formalized through becoming a Facilitator. Within situated learning, this process can be effectively described as legitimate peripheral participation (Lave & Wenger 1991): new members of the LCVC initially begin with simple, low-stakes tasks which allow them the opportunity to learn the shared norms of the LCVC and their position relative to other more experienced members. Through this process, they can come to construct their identity as a member of the group and gradually move from

the periphery towards the core. Dołowy-Rybińska (2020: 224) observes this same process in the context of online Kashubian revitalization.

One example of community building through socially mediated language learning is the 30 Day Challenge. Participants in this event are challenged to make a short post each day in LC and interact with the posts of other participants (see Figure 4). Interactions with the post take the form of simple acknowledgement (using the react function), corrections, questions or starting further conversations in the comments. The Challenge creates a snowball effect, increasing the quantity of posts in the LCVC. Participants are encouraged to include an English translation as a learning tool for others and as a reference for any corrections. To increase motivation, participants number their posts, e.g., "30 Day Challenge Day 10 of 30," and to try not to break a "streak" of daily posts.

Peer-mediated learning can be seen in action by tracing forms produced by individual members. The case of neologisms is particularly illuminating, as it is possible to see individuals picking up a neologism in the LCVC, using it, and then teaching it to others. In October 2014, Landry posted in the LCVC suggesting *plas latwal* (<*plas* 'place' *latwal* '(spider) web') as a neologism for 'website' (Figure 2). This is then taken up by a few more members, with 5 occurrences of the term in 2015. In February 2015, Sharon uses the form *website-la* ('website-DEF') remarking on the peculiarity of this form (Figure 3). A Facilitator, Alice, calls the form "cute" (*Website-la çé miyon* '*Website-la* is cute'), before recalling Landry's use of the term *plas latwal*. She compares it to a short-lived alternative *plas filé* (lit. 'threaded place') which she dismisses due to the polysemy of *filé* ('threaded', 'ground sassafras leaves', 'sharp', 'gulp', amongst others). Matthew also positively evaluates *plas latwal* and neologisms in general. A few months later, Sharon herself has taken up the term (Figure 4). These extracts exemplify how specific linguistic forms can be transmitted through the community in a way which is mediated by peers and, especially, by the authority of Facilitators.

Figure 2 Landry posts suggesting the neologism *plas latwal* for 'website', 2014-10-08.

Figure 3 LCVC users discuss the neologism *plas latwal* 'website', 2015-02-15.

Figure 4 Sharon uses *plas latwal* 'website' for the first time during a '30 Day Challenge' event, 2015-05-19.

3.2. THE ROLE OF THE LEADER

The role of Christophe Landry as founder of the LCVC and revitalization figurehead cannot be overstated. Landry previously tutored students on the now-defunct e-learning platform EduFire, and the LCVC was initially a practice space for those classes. Several members of the LCVC were first tutored by him. Over the past decade, Landry has regulated activity within the LCVC and engaged in activism beyond it. Landry has spent considerable effort encouraging participation from peripheral members. Especially in the earlier stages of the LCVC's existence, this would often take the form of positive reinforcement for active contributors, with subtle and not-so-subtle reminders to inactive members to participate. Regular reference would be made to Landry's *lahash* ('ax') which he would use to *koupé* ('cut') dormant students (Figure 5, Figure 6). The metaphor of *lahash* became so well known that sometimes Landry's posts could be a simple "*Lahash, lahash.* Chop, chop" (2013-11-07). Posts such as Figures 5 and 6 typically received many responses from learners apologizing and asking not to be "chopped." The post in Figure 6 received 45 such comments, which in turn received encouraging responses in the form of likes or short comments from Landry, the Facilitators, and other learners.

> **Christophe Landry** · November 1, 2013 ·
>
> About 6 people have been interacting regularly here … out of 137.
> The chopping block will recommence this weekend.
> Remember: practice makes perfect.
> This group exists for you to USE LC, not for you to learn it.
>
> Lahash va dèt paré pou koupé dimansh-la. 🙂 ["The ax will be ready to chop this Sunday."]

Figure 5 Post by Landry referencing his *lahash* 'ax', ending *Lahash va dèt paré pou koupé dimansh-la* 'The ax will be ready to chop this Sunday.' 2013-11-01.

> **Christophe Landry** · February 24, 2016
>
> M'ap spéré vouzòt ki ékri jamé pou posté é pou montré vouzòt apé sharé dan KV.
>
> I'm waiting on folks who never write in here to post and to upload yourself speaking KV.
>
> This small group is precisely for us to help one another (1) gain knowledge, (2) confidence, and (3) aptitude. Otherwise you'll never speak. We need people speaking.
>
> Ayou mô lahash? 😟😟😟🫥🫥🫥🫥 ["Where is my ax?"]

Figure 6 Post by Landry referencing his *lahash* 'ax', *Ayou mô lahash* 'Where is my ax?'. Here 'KV' is an abbreviation for Kouri-Vini. 2016-02-24.

At times when activity in the LCVC was high, Landry's posts referencing *lahash* would include more positive language, encouraging learners to continue posting and learning (Figure 7). This regulation of activity by Landry was intended to keep the numbers in the group low, so that he and the Facilitators could follow the progress of learners in the group and avoid the group becoming distracted (see Section 3.3).

> **Christophe Landry** · October 27, 2014 ·
>
> PTZ (pou tô zinfòrmsyon)
> FYI
>
> Dipi lanné dis-nèf sen, na JAMÉ gin otan mounn apé aktivmen aprenn kourí-viní. Zòt apé rentré dan listwar! Donné-vouzòt un pous lévé pou ça! Mé lash pa isit; kontinnué a embéli afin parlé parfé!
>
> Since the year 1900, there has NEVER been as many people actively learning kourí-viní. You're making history! Give yourselves a thumbs up for that! But, don't stop here! Continue to embellish in order to speak fluently!

Figure 7 Post by Landry encouraging participation in LC followed by an English translation. 2014-10-27.

The pressure on community leaders such as Landry can often lead to them feeling "burnt out or under-appreciated" (Wenger et al. 2002: 112). The Facilitators have therefore taken on a vital role in shouldering some of Landry's burden. Moreover, the establishment of the Facilitator role was intended to "create an internal democratic space composed of serious stakeholders" who could "collectively agree on policy" (Christophe Landry, interview, 2022-12-23). Landry and the Facilitators have viewed this structure as essential for the sustainability of the LCVC, something also reflected in controls on membership and group boundaries.

3.3. GROUP BOUNDARIES

As Suler writes, "any truly rewarding group will be one with a strong boundary that activates sharing, trust, intimacy, and personal growth […] it is these kinds of groups that keep people coming back to cyberspace as a rewarding social activity" (Suler 2016: 280). Many in the LCVC have known each other for a decade or more, and, despite never having met in person, have become part of each other's everyday lives. Members often call each other *famiy* ('family'), evidencing the close bonds they have forged over the years.

The LCVC's strong group identity has been purposefully cultivated. The LCVC began life as a public group visible to anyone. As the group grew in size, Landry made the decision to convert it into a private group, allowing tighter controls on membership. In discussions I observed in October 2014, concerns were raised that focus would be lost if the LCVC contained large numbers of users who were not participating. Comparisons were made to goings-on in another, much larger Facebook group, the *Cajun French Virtual Table Française* ('Cajun French Virtual French Table'), which has around 59,000 members at this writing. That group's stated aim is to facilitate the learning and maintenance of LF; in practice, it has been dominated by symbolic discussions and disputes over issues of ethnolinguistic identity, authenticity, and heritage. These discussions happen mostly in English, with no structured teaching or learning akin to that of LCVC. In a recent study of the group, Glain (2021) records that about 65% of the daily posts in November 2020 were in English, with a significant amount of the French-language content generated by francophones from other parts of the world.

The LCVC's focus on teaching and learning was formalized with the publication of the first Code of Conduct in December 2013 (Figure 8) which can be viewed as a language policy document. Notable in this policy is the regulation of language choice within the LCVC. Rule 1 forbids the use of any language but LC or English, notably French and other French-based Creoles. Rule 3 forbids comparison to other French-based Creole languages. Strong language boundaries are emphasized through both of these rules, reinforcing the concern with reclaiming LC as a language in its own right rather than a "broken" derivative of French or an offshoot of other Creole languages. Rules 2 and 4 regulate participation, formalizing the need for an environment which feels familiar and trustworthy, without unknown observers "lurking" on the sidelines (see Suler 2016: 280). Online metalinguistic communities such as the LCVC, just as their offline counterparts, may establish their own internal policies and practices to reinforce language-ideological objectives and reinforce a sense of group cohesion.

This Facebook group was designed for the active learner, to be a forum to practice, use and live the KV language.

We encourage passive learners to utilize the KV fanpage here on Facebook, which is much closer to your learning needs.

We ask active learners to take time to review the list of rules we expect all members to abide by. Failure to do so will result in group members being removed and, occasionally, permanently banned from the group.

GROUP RULES

1. **Only the KV and English languages are permitted in the group.** Other languages cause confusion to learners. French, Spanish, Portuguese, Haitian, Mauritian, Antilles, other Creoles and other languages, are therefore not permitted in the group.

2. **Group members must participate in order to remain in the group.** Participation is here defined as active engagement with the language, no matter which level of fluency you are. Key is to actively use it.

3. We request speakers of other Creole languages to **not explain differences between Louisiana Creole and their language in the group**. We welcome you here in the group merely as observers or as learners of Louisiana Creole.

4. **No event, business or any other publicity that is not LC language-related is permitted in the group.** On first offense, a warning will be provided. On second offense, the poster will be removed and permanently banned from the group.

Figure 8 The LCVC Code of Conduct, 2013-12-22.

4. ONLINE ACTIVISM AND RESOURCE DEVELOPMENT

Language activism can be understood through a non-essentializing lens as incorporating far more than formal organizations or political campaigns, instead including informal groups laying claim to, or contesting, a language's status through participation in metalinguistic debates (Puchowski 2022). Members of the LCVC have conducted a great deal of public-facing activism beyond learning and teaching. This activism ranges from campaigns around language naming (Section 4.1), orthography development (Section 4.2) and the development of resources (Section 4.3). Each of these activities serves an important role in furthering the language-ideological aims of the movement.

One way in which the community promoted these activities—and, by extension, the symbolic concerns they represent—was through the Facebook page *Louisiana Creole Language Fanpage*,[1] the public face of the online language revitalization community which at this writing has 6,400 followers. Unlike the LCVC, the Fanpage has always been publicly accessible by any web user. LCVC Facilitators take responsibility for regularly creating and posting content according to an agreed schedule. Much of the Fanpage content is visual: images feature vibrant designs to teach vocabulary, grammar, pronunciation, or spelling (Figure 9, Figure 10). Other images include proverbs (Figure 11) and memes (Figure 12).

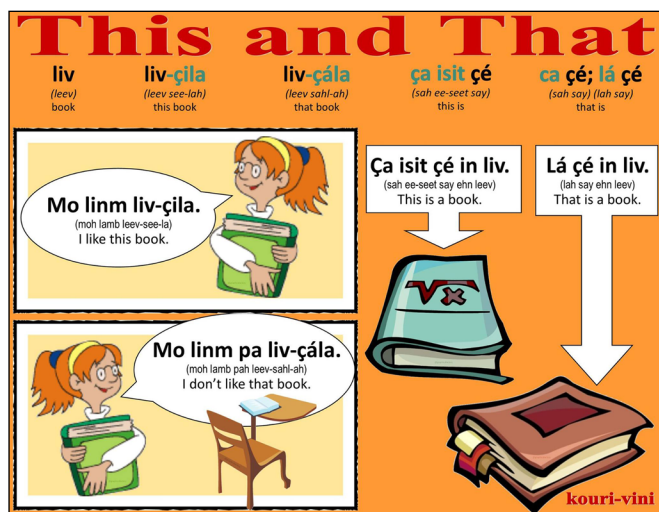**Figure 9** Infographic for teaching vocabulary with a beach theme from the Fanpage.

Figure 10 Infographic for teaching demonstratives from the Fanpage.

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1   https://web.archive.org/web/20220915000000*/https://www.facebook.com/Kourivini/, archive from January 2022.

Figure 11 Proverb image from the Fanpage, text reads 'The cat's tail grows with time.'

Figure 12 Meme-style image from the Fanpage, with text reading 'Work smart, not hard.'

4.1. OWNERSHIP: LANGUAGE NAMING AND THE MAKING OF *KOURI-VINI*

A key thread running through online activism for LC is the establishment of language ownership and language boundaries. It was with this in mind that Landry led an effort to change LC's official International Standards Organization 639–3 Language Code (Landry et al. 2014). This standard provides not only a three-letter code (lou) but also a standard designation for the language; in practice, these both appear in various venues such as encyclopedias, academic and journalistic articles, and online databases such as Ethnologue. In 2014, LC's designation was *Louisiana Creole French*. Landry et al. (2014) argued that this gave the false impression of LC as a dialect of French and, in turn, perpetuated stereotypes of LC as "broken" French. This, they argued, had policy consequences: "no legislation in the state acknowledges Louisiana Creole, precisely because the term 'Creole French' places it as a dialect of French" (Landry et al. 2014: 3). The request, approved in 2015, marked a watershed in the movement's history: it was the first time that the online community had affected language policy.

The subsequent years saw the rise of an alternative glossonym, *Kouri-Vini*. This is one of a handful of terms which have been used by native speakers to describe their variety. It derives from the verbs [kuɾi] *kouri* 'go' and [vini] *vini* 'come', distinct from the LF /ale/ *aller* 'go' and /vnir/ *venir*

'come'. Other such terms, derived from lexical and morphosyntactic shibboleths distinguishing LF and LC, include *pa-konnin* [pakɔ̃nɛ̃] 'don't know', cf. LF *connais pas* [kɔ̃nɛpɑ] 'don't know' (Valdman et al. 1998: 346) or [mogɛ̃togɛ̃] *mo-gin-to-gin* 'I have, you have' cf. LF [ʒetɑ] *j'ai, t'as*. The *Louisiana Creole Dictionary* (Valdman et al. 1998: 255) defines *kouri-vini* as a pejorative moniker for LC. Wendte (2020) presents the most detailed analysis of the term based on interviews with native speakers who use it as a way of labelling speech which they perceive as different to their own (see Wendte 2020: 159, 236–244, 322–325).

While *Louisiana Creole French* was seen as risking comparisons with French, *Louisiana Creole* alone presents other challenges which *Kouri-Vini* might solve. In a 2016 blog post, Landry contends that the *Creole* label leads some to compare LC to other French-lexifier creoles, conflating, for example, Haitian Creole and Louisiana Creole: "the not-so-positive aspect of pan-Créolité is that it encourages the idea that 'Creole is Creole,' that linguistically, Louisiana Creolophones should adhere to Haitian orthography and linguistic patterns" (Landry 2016b). This problem was evidenced in 2017, when CODOFIL invited Nathan A. Wendte and me to participate in the organization's first Creole Committee. Members of the Committee suggested teaching Haitian Creole or Guadeloupean Creole in Louisiana schools since these were seen as "the same Creole language" as LC.

In blog post remarks reminiscent of DeGraff's work on Creole Exceptionalism (DeGraff 2003), Landry argues that the designation *Creole* detracts from the legitimacy of LC and carries historical baggage suggesting the language is derivative, broken or incomplete:

> Using a language of prestige, like French, when you hear the word, do you immediately think: "broken Latin?" Do you even think Latin, at all? Probably not. Centuries ago, before Francophones asserted themselves as French-speakers, folks used to call it "vulgar Latin." […] By claiming to speak French […] Frenchmen anchored themselves to their land by endonyms such as "French" and in so doing demand that people see them, and their language, as French, rather than Latin and vulgar Latin.
>
> (Landry 2016b)

As Wendte (2020: 90–91, 2022) has discussed, the glossonym *Kouri-Vini* can be viewed as strategic essentialism: by using a label which cannot be conflated with *Creole*, *Cajun*, or *French* and which draws on the shibboleth features of LC, the glossonym *Kouri-Vini* is an attempt to disrupt ethnolinguistic labelling practices which equate linguistic and ethnic identity. The term *Kouri-Vini* is now used by several local language organizations, including the state language agency CODOFIL[2] and the longstanding activist group CREOLE, Inc.[3] The label also receives international exposure: the glossonym was prominently featured in a recent BBC article entitled *Kouri-Vini: The return of the US' lost language* (Teo 2023). Those using the term *Kouri-Vini* join other Creole-speakers worldwide engaged in language making: like speakers of Papiamentu, Chabacano or Takitaki, they have reclaimed a once-pejorative label to construct their language on their own terms (see Krämer et al. 2022).

4.2. CODIFICATION: THE KOURI-VINI ORTHOGRAPHY

Members of the LCVC developed a contemporary orthography for LC, known as the Kouri-Vini Orthography (KVO). Precursors to the KVO appeared as early as Landry (2003, 2007), with the system undergoing gradual permutations which culminated in the publication of an *Orthography Guide* (Landry et al. 2016). This orthography now represents the most widespread system for writing the language. The KVO was intended primarily to supersede the system proposed by Klingler (1996) as used in the *Dictionary of Louisiana Creole* (Valdman et al. 1998). Klingler himself never intended to act as an authority on LC spelling, ending his article by acknowledging that "Creole writers—the sole arbitrators in the matter—may refuse the system proposed here, in which

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2   See https://www.louisianafrench.org/about/faq/, last accessed November 2023.

3   See https://www.creoleinc.net/education, last accessed November 2023.

case one must hope they will find another which will […] allow the language to fulfill its role as an identity marker for the Creole community" (my translation, Klingler 1996: 202).[4]

This is exactly what Landry et al. (2016) set out to do, arguing that Klingler's system was "well-meaning and useful in academic contexts" but deprived LC of linguistic distinctiveness due to its similarity to Haitian Creole orthography (Landry et al. 2016: 2). The KVO therefore features some salient differences from the Haitian orthography, for example the use of ⟨in⟩ to represent /ɛ̃/ where the Haitian orthography and Klingler's system use ⟨en⟩.

Although the KVO also achieves a visual distinction between LC and French, the orthography features conspicuous reminders of French, rendering /s/ with ⟨ç⟩ only in the words /sa/ ⟨ça⟩ 'that' and the copula /se/ ⟨çé⟩ and elsewhere using ⟨s⟩ as in the pre-verbal future /sa/ ⟨sa⟩ or the pre-verbal conditional /se/ ⟨sé⟩. The KVO also employs a system of "etymological spelling" whereby nasal vowels are represented with following ⟨m⟩ or ⟨n⟩ depending on their French spelling e.g., /fɛ̃/ ⟨fim⟩ 'hungry' (cf. French /fɛ̃/ ⟨faim⟩ 'hungry'), ⟨fin⟩ 'end' (cf. French /fɛ̃/ ⟨fin⟩ 'end'). These spellings serve to distinguish between homophones but can also be interpreted as a strategy for the construction of linguistic authenticity through the historicization of LC, or even as a quirk retained from earlier iterations of the orthography which drew more heavily on French spelling e.g., ⟨faim⟩ 'hungry' (Landry 2003, 2007). As Landry explained, "we wanted it distinct but accessible [and] memorable, so the etymological hints remind readers that it is related to French but visibly not French i.e., we had to be careful not to produce something so foreign that Louisiana Creole [people] would not use [it]" (Christophe Landry, interview, 2022-12-23). Wendte (2022) interprets this as a representational strategy for binding together the spatiotemporal components of contemporary Creole identity.

Another concern of the KVO is ease of acquisition. The KVO caters to learners who are literate in English, including "symbols and sounds with which Louisianians are familiar" (Landry et al. 2016: 2). As in English, the LCVC orthography uses ⟨sh⟩ for /ʃ/ and ⟨ch⟩ for /tʃ/ where Klingler's system uses French-style ⟨ch⟩ and ⟨tch⟩ respectively. This is also the justification given for the use of ⟨ñ⟩ for /ɲ/ and ⟨é⟩ for /e/, since these appear in familiar words and names e.g., ⟨jalapeño⟩, ⟨Beyoncé⟩.

In 2013, I was asked to join in the orthography development process for the KVO as "consultant linguist." I attended orthography planning meetings, participated in discussions and debates, and eventually submitted a compromise between the KVO and Klingler's orthography (Mayeux 2014). I proposed "simplifying" the number of nasal vowel representations by removing the system of etymological spellings and incorporating Klingler's representation of nasal vowels into the KVO with the exception of ⟨in⟩ for /ɛ̃/. This was rejected on the grounds that "simplifying" the system would be akin to "simplifying" the language. See Mayeux (2014) and Wendte (2019, 2022) for further discussion.

The KVO remains one of the LCVC's most significant outputs: "now, Louisiana Creolophones have an orthography which they can proudly claim is uniquely theirs" (Landry 2014 et al.: 2). Given the visual nature of spelling and the social meaning it conveys (Sebba 2007), it is of no surprise that "orthographies by definition symbolize, naturalize and legitimize difference and/or similarities of a cultural or political origin" (Jaffe 1999: 216). In an online environment where we "type ourselves into being," (Sundén 2003; see also Suler 2016) orthographic practice represents a particularly potent semiotic strategy (see also Dołowy-Rybińska 2020: 221). One of the first outputs using the newly standardized KVO was an online version of the out-of-print *Dictionary of Louisiana Creole* (Valdman et al. 1998). Volunteers from the LCVC undertook the laborious task of manually re-transcribing each entry in the index of that dictionary using the KVO, a testament to the orthography's central role as a symbol of language ownership.

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4   "Si les écrivains créoles—les seuls arbitres en la matière—refusent le système proposé ici, il faut espérer qu'ils en trouveront en autre qui […] permettra à la langue de jouer pleinement son rôle identitaire pour la communauté créole".

4.3. THE CREATION OF RELATED RESOURCES

The LCVC has promoted LC in a variety of other contexts. One important site for language learning is Memrise, a platform for user-created flashcards. In April 2016, Adrien Guillory-Chatman created the Memrise course and led a group of Facilitators to contribute vocabulary and audio. The course, shown in Figures 13 and 14, covers 875 grammatical constructions or vocabulary items over 47 levels and has had over 2,900 users.[5] Since Memrise courses can be created by any user, the site offers the opportunity for activists and educators for minoritized languages to create their own courses and curricula. However, concerns have also been raised about data sovereignty. These concerns came to the fore in 2020, when Memrise created a new platform, Decks, to house community-created courses. Critically, Decks did not (yet) have its own app which meant that the LC course would no longer be available on smartphones, where the majority of learners were using it. This decision was eventually reversed.[6]
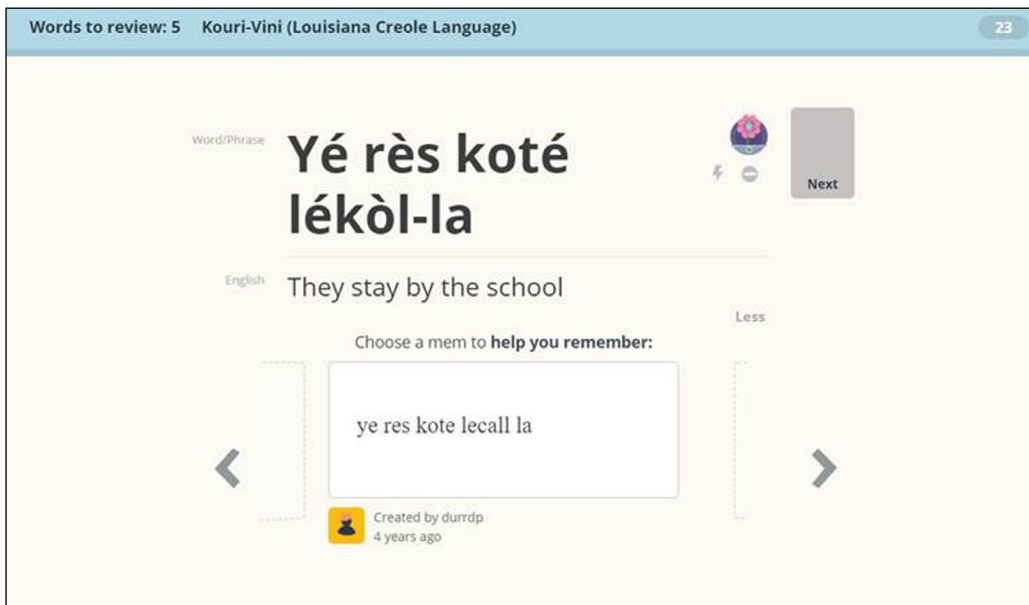
The LCVC has also collaborated with organizations concerned with language endangerment which have been a further avenue for establishing control over narratives surrounding language labeling and usage. Collaborations with YouTube channels dedicated to languages ensure that LC, its

5   https://app.memrise.com/course/1046984/kouri-vini-louisiana-creole-language/, last accessed November 2023.

6   https://community.memrise.com/t/important-announcement-about-decks/49470, last accessed November 2023.

orthography and its new speakers are now represented to thousands of people worldwide.[7] LC was also a featured language in Google Arts & Culture's Woolaroo app, an augmented reality application which recognizes objects using a smartphone camera and provides words for them in a given language.[8] However, the team from the LCVC involved in recording and translating words for Woolaroo in 2019 had to follow up repeatedly before the language data given to Google Arts & Culture were made available in 2022. The initial proposal for Woolaroo was to create a standalone app including user submissions; the final product was instead a widely publicized "experiment" available through the Google Arts & Culture app only and without long-term support. In the end, one contributor commented that it felt more like "unpaid work […] in a public relations exercise for Google" (Jeremy (pseudonym), interview, 2022-12-22).

2020 saw the publication of the first learner's guide to the language: *Ti Liv Kréyòl: A Learner's Guide to Louisiana Creole* (Guillory-Chatman et al. 2020). The list of authors is significant in that it represents a collaboration between the online community (represented by Guillory-Chatman), the preceding generation of Louisiana-based language activists (represented by Wiltz, founding Member and current President of CREOLE, Inc.), and linguists involved in revitalization of the language (represented by Wendte, who initiated the project, and me).

A number of creative works have been produced in LC. May 2022 saw the publication of *Févi* (Mayers & Mayeux, eds., 2022), an anthology of poetry written mostly by learners of LC in the KVO. Co-editor of that collection and illustrator of the *Ti Liv Kréyòl*, Baton Rouge Poet Laureate Jonathan "radbwa faroush" Mayers uses LC in poetry, painting, and to curate exhibitions of Louisiana art.[9] The first novella in LC has recently been published by one of a new generation of activists (Pierre-Auguste 2022).

5. AN ONLINE–OFFLINE DIVIDE? THE FUTURE OF THE VIRTUAL CLASSROOM

To champion LC, members of the LCVC recently created a non-profit organization called Chinbo, Inc. (/tʃɛ̃bo/ 'hold, keep, maintain, preserve'). In October 2022, the LCVC's Fanpage was renamed as Chinbo takes on the role of the official and institutional public face of the LCVC community.[10] A key goal in founding Chinbo is to enable activism for LC through formal interaction with other non-profits and the government. Chinbo also represents the increasingly imperceptible divide between the online and offline activities of the LCVC, already seen in the discussion of the adoption of the KVO and the *Kouri-Vini* glossonym by organizations and the media.

Another important recent event has been the COVID-19 pandemic, which resulted in the growth of hybrid online-offline get-togethers. Members of the LCVC had been meeting weekly via video call for some time before the pandemic, including for *Kouri-Vini 101* classes taught by Clif St. Laurent. Older, native speakers of LC also began to hold community events online in response to local health advice. Members of the LCVC began to join these community events. This was the first time that many people in both groups met each other, and it has reshaped interactions between these two generations. Today, some events remain in hybrid format, attracting native and new speakers from across and outside of Louisiana. By now, there is nothing exceptional about these groups getting together. LC-related events today regularly feature both older and younger generations, native speakers and new speakers, familiar faces from online and offline worlds.

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7   e.g., "The Sound of the Kouri-Vini/Louisiana Creole language (Numbers, Greetings, Words & Sample Text)" by ILoveLanguages (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0Eq9mkAegf4, last accessed November 2023) or "Michael speaking Kouri-Vini|Louisiana Creole language|Wikitongues" by Wikitongues (https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NMBVCEq8TLU, last accessed November 2023).

8   https://blog.google/outreach-initiatives/arts-culture/woolaroo-new-tool-exploring-indigenous-languages/, last accessed November 2023.

9   e.g., *Mitoloji Latannyèr/Mythologies Louisianaises* (Louisiana Capitol Park Museum, October 21 2023), https://louisianastatemuseum.org/exhibit/mythologies-louisianaises, last accessed November 2023.

10   https://www.facebook.com/ChinboInc/, see also https://www.chinbo.org/, last accessed November 2023.

The COVID-19 pandemic may have increased the speed of this process but did not set it into motion, since the social networks of many new speakers have always included native speakers (grandparents, neighbors, cousins, etc.), in addition to their online compatriots in the LCVC. As Landry put it, the members of the LCVC "are mostly *relearners* […] they don't stop seeing old people, young people, middle-aged people, […] [they] talk about what they learn online, they're like worker bees disseminating pollen" (Christophe Landry, interview, 2022-12-23).

6. CONCLUSION: CRITICALLY APPROACHING LANGUAGE REVITALIZATION ON SOCIAL MEDIA

In the decade that I have been a participant observer in the LCVC, the online revitalization movement has grown far beyond the small Facebook community in which it began. Through its core practices of peer-mediated learning and activism, the LCVC has had a substantial impact on local and international representations of LC and has succeeded in creating a new generation of young learners and activists who now congregate on Twitter, TikTok and Discord. At the same time, links have been strengthened with elderly, native speakers of LC in a process accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic. Although the long-term impact on language vitality remains to be seen, the past decade in the LCVC suggests that online revitalization efforts can go beyond a mere flash in the pan. As has long been observed, virtual communities "seem to be stronger than observers usually give them credit for" (Castells 2000: 388).

This seems especially true today. In her rich ethnography of young minority language activists in Poland, Dołowy-Rybińska (2020) finds that social media plays a central role, inseparable from the activists' other activities: as she concludes, "the internet is not so much a subject of study as an inseparable context of all language, cultural and social practices" (Dołowy-Rybińska 2020: 219). Social psychology of the internet has long called for a deconstruction of the online/offline dichotomy (Wilson & Peterson 2002: 455–457), towards an understanding that "the virtual is not the opposite of the real; instead it is a component of experiencing the real" (Farman 2020: 22). Moving beyond digital dualism comes closer to the reality of online language revitalization communities such as the LCVC, where members themselves see no hard boundary between the two contexts.

Just like their offline counterparts, online metalinguistic communities engage their own internal structures and policies in the service of language maintenance and revitalization, facilitating the co-construction of community and the furtherance of language-ideological aims. Social media offers an important context in which discourses of language ownership and authenticity may be constructed, contested, and amplified in language-based social movements. As such, longstanding language-ideological debates may be given new life on social media (see also Wagner 2017). For example, by popularizing the glossonym *Kouri-Vini*, members of the LCVC contest persistent discourses delegitimizing LC as "broken" French or derivative of other French-based Creoles. Social media also provides new semiotic resources for such struggles, which may explain the intense investment of the LCVC in their orthography. The significant role of visual media and the written word on social media imbues orthographic practices with special potential as a visual symbol of LC's legitimacy and authenticity. It is fair to say that the LCVC has succeeded in their goal of language making, with LC obtaining recognition under the moniker *Kouri-Vini* which it was never afforded just a decade ago.

Key to understanding the longevity of the LCVC has been the recognition that language revitalization is really about people (Costa 2017; Heller 2004). While language revitalization is the focal practice of the community, the ties that bind the members of the LCVC as *famiy* ('family') are personal. It is in the context of these online relationships that peer-mediated learning has flourished in the LCVC for the past decade. They have also been the basis for informal language activism operating largely through metalinguistic discourses and the creation of language resources (see also Puchowski 2022). Importantly, as in any other social movement, the shared practices of the LCVC are socially mediated and structured. The revitalization movement owes much to the galvanizing, at times uncompromising, leadership and authority of Christophe Landry. Likewise, the LCVC Facilitators have dedicated substantial portions of their lives to language work while juggling full-time jobs and family. Revitalization scholarship should further examine the role and motivations of such

"language icons" (Shah & Brenzinger 2018). In all, perhaps the most important contribution of social media in the case of the LCVC has been to provide a space for these dedicated individuals to connect and build a community around the language for which they share a passion.

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The author has no competing interests to declare.

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