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Language Documentation and Description

LANGUAGE SNAPSHOT

Louisiana Creole (Louisiana, USA) – Language Snapshot

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ABSTRACT

Louisiana Creole is an exogenous, French-based creole of the Americas and the only such creole to have had its genesis in what would become the United States. Records of the language date back to the later half of the 18th century, and at one time it was widely used by speakers of various races and ethicities in South Louisiana and the greater Gulf South region. A series of events that includes the Sale of Louisiana (1803), the Civil War (1861), compulsory public schooling (1921), and two world wars (1917, 1941) all contributed to the shift away from the language in favor of English. Although the language has effectively ceased to be transmitted intergenerationally, it persists in small pockets of ever-aging mother-tongue speakers. Additionally, an established revitalization movement is underway that has produced a sizeable number of competent younger speakers. This snapshot pays particular attention to an underdescribed regional dialect of the language spoken along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain in St. Tammany Parish (Louisiana).

Keywords: Louisiana, Gulf South, French-based creoles

Language name: *kréyòl*, *françé*, Kouri-Vini, Louisiana Creole, Louisiana Creole French

Language family: French-lexifier creole (Americas)

ISO 639-3 Code: lou

Glottolog Code: loui1240

Population: ~5,000 first-language speakers and several hundred second-language users (Mayeux 2019)

Location: South Louisiana broadly with diasporic populations in Texas, California, and elsewhere. Highlighted variety (Northshore Creole) historically concentrated along Bayou Lacombe (30°18′54″N 89°55′53″W)

Vitality rating: 8a Moribund (EGIDS)

1. OVERVIEW

Louisiana Creole (LC) is the only French-lexifier creole to have developed in continental North America. Although early LC is sparsely attested, it is believed to have emerged as a distinct language among enslaved laborers, Native Americans, and Francophone settlers in colonial Louisiana during the first half of the 18th century (Klingler 2003). The language has been in contact with French—to varying degrees—throughout its history. Other languages involved in LC's genesis include African languages (mostly from West Africa) and Indigenous languages (particularly of the Muskogean family). Additionally, LC has been influenced by other French creoles of the Americas (notably Antillean Creole and Haitian Creole) due to speakers having migrated to Louisiana after LC had been established (Desdunes 1911: 5; Dessens 2005). More recently, American English has exerted heavy contact pressure on the language.

Today, LC speakers are concentrated in three areas of Louisiana: St. Martin Parish along Bayou Teche, Pointe Coupee Parish along False River, and along the German and Acadian Coasts of the Mississippi River between New Orleans and Baton Rouge (Klingler 2019). Additionally, there are historically attested LC-speaking populations in Natchitoches Parish along Cane River, in Plaquemines Parish along the Mississippi River, on Mon Louis Island in Mobile Bay (Alabama), and in St. Tammany Parish along Lake Pontchartrain (Klingler & Dajko 2006). In the remainder of this snapshot, I will be calling special attention to this last variety ("Northshore Creole" or "NC" hereafter).

Northshore Creole (NC), a dialect of LC, was historically concentrated on a series of waterways found along the north shore of Lake Pontchartrain in contemporary St. Tammany Parish. These include Bayou Lacombe (in particular) as well as Bayou Paquet, Bayou Liberty, Bayou Bonfouca, and Bayou Vincent (see Figure 1). Lake Pontchartrain connected Northshore Creole communities with New Orleans (the hub of the region both historically and presently).

NC is seen as an outlier among LC dialects due to its geographic isolation and a handful of grammatical idiosyncrasies (Klingler & Dajko 2006). Despite this, there is evidence of ethnohistorical links between the Northshore Creole community and that of New Orleans. My decision to label this variety "Northshore Creole" is based on the geographic concentration of its speakers (historically) within St. Tammany Parish. To the extent that NC speakers or their descendants are involved in revitalization activities for LC, they are likely to refer to their variety as "Kouri-Vini" (Wendte 2022b: 110).

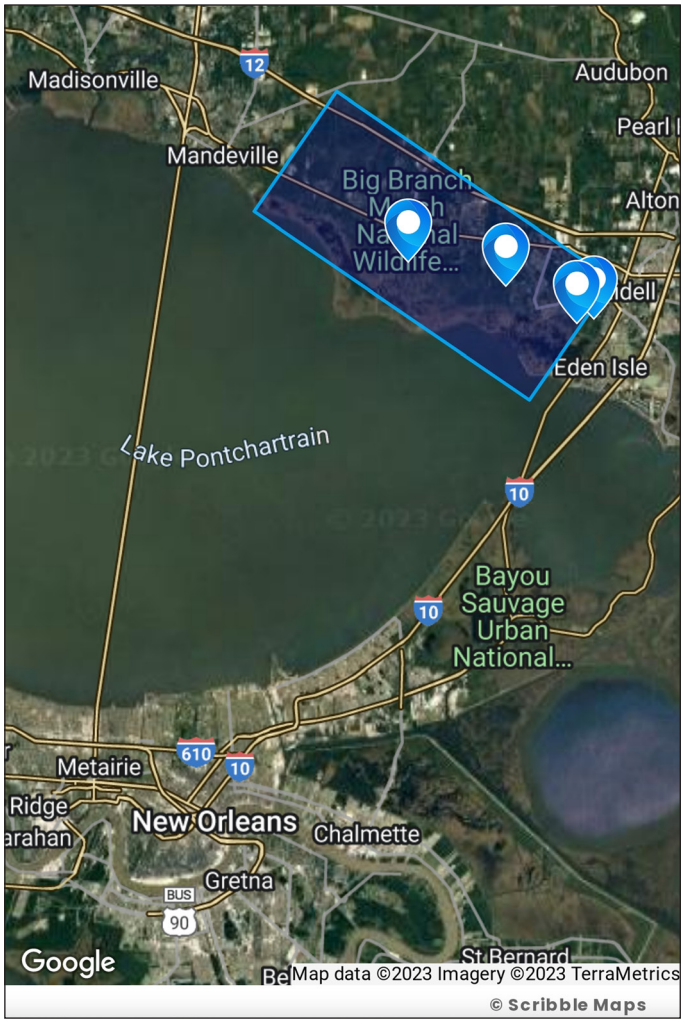

Figure 1: Approximate range of Northshore Creole. Shaded rectangle estimates widest possible extent of speaker base; markers indicate origins of known NC speakers.

NC is a particularly interesting variety of LC because of its proximity to New Orleans, its relative isolation from other Creole-speaking regions, and its unique history of close contact with an Indigenous community (i.e., the Bayou Lacombe Choctaw (cf. Bushnell 1909; Gilbert 1989)). Additionally, this same area is noted as a refuge for *marrons* 'runaway slaves' (Ellis 1981: 38; Lief & McCusker 2019: 44, 48; Mayeux 2019: 56). In the late 19th century, Father Adrien Rouquette (known by the Choctaw as *Chahta Ima* 'like a Choctaw') founded missions on the Northshore. He was well respected by Choctaws and Creoles alike, and both groups worshiped at the churches he established. Subsequently, these became cultural and spiritual anchors for the Northshore Creole community. Contact between Creoles and Choctaws along the Northshore is further substantiated by the presence of a small handful of Choctaw words in NC that are otherwise unattested in LC or Louisiana French (Wendte 2022a).

By most accounts, NC is moribund. All remaining members of the ethnolinguistic group have shifted to English. If recent estimates for speakers of all LC dialects can be trusted, then NC could only be assumed to make up an extremely small proportion of this total. Mayeux (2019: 56) notes that his own attempts to locate speakers have been fruitless. Although on a recent trip the author was also unable to find

any speakers, community members insisted that there were some who still use the language. Further fieldwork in the area would help corroborate this statement. More important for the ecology of NC is the fact that there remains a Creole-identifying community associated with the language.

2. EXISTING DESCRIPTION

Descriptive work on LC began in the latter half of the 19th century. Various theses and articles appeared over the course of the 20th century, treating the language in greater or lesser detail (see Klingler 2019 for an overview). Two varieties of LC benefit from full descriptive grammars, these being the varieties of St. Martin Parish (Neumann 1985) and of Pointe Coupee Parish (Klingler 2003). There is also a dictionary of LC (Valdman et al. 1998) that includes data from the aforementioned 19th and 20th century works as well as from fieldwork conducted in several regions of the state (including St. Tammany Parish). Klingler notes about LC as a whole, "Perhaps paradoxically, however, it is today both one of the most seriously endangered creole languages and among the most thoroughly described" (2019: 94).

As part of the fieldwork informing the *Dictionary of Louisiana Creole* (Valdman et al. 1998), interviews were conducted with speakers of NC. To my knowledge, however, the audio cassettes of this fieldwork were lost in Hurricane Katrina. The researcher responsible for these interviews, Étienne Viator, had begun collaborating with a native speaker (deidentified for privacy) of NC to create a grammar for the language loosely modeled off of Dr. Albert Valdman's *Ann Pale Kreyòl* (1988), which is a learning resource for Haitian Creole. This manuscript (Viator & Anonymous 2017) was never published or widely circulated. If members of the Northshore Creole community were to undertake revitalization efforts, it is unclear whether learners would choose to pick up where Viator left off (that is, in prioritizing NC forms) or join ranks with the larger and better established "Kouri-Vini" movement founded by Dr. Christophe Landry and today "officially" overseen by the non-profit organization, Chinbo (www.chinbo.org), which tends to reproduce the norms of LC spoken along Bayou Teche.

The only published data on NC (aside from the lexical data included in Valdman et al. 1998) comes from a 2006 article by Klingler and Dajko describing peripheral varieties of LC. The article, however, deals only with a small sample of grammatical characteristics and presents little linguistic material. Beyond that, the only remaining source of information on the language of which I am aware comes from recordings made by Dr. Thomas Klingler in the 1990s. Klingler graciously allowed me to digitize these recordings and extract the audio with the help of Chris Segura at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette's Center for Louisiana Studies; they have since been transcribed. After consultation with the Bayou Lacombe Museum, copies of the audio, video, and transcripts were entrusted to descendant members of the Northshore Creole community who will decide what happens next with these materials.

3. ONGOING RESEARCH

One of the main findings of Klingler and Dajko regarding NC is that the variety makes exclusive use of invariant verb forms (2006: 24), which is similar to other French creoles of the Americas but dissimilar from most contemporary LC speakers (concentrated in St. Martin Parish). The author is currently researching this claim more systematically. A closer analysis of the only extant corpus for this variety (see above) does not appear to support their initial conclusion (Wendte 2022a, 2024), which may provide clues as to the path by which LC came to possess alternations in its verbal system in other dialects. In the

longer term, the author is interested in the dynamics of language change within the Northshore Creole community ecology, seeking to understand how language contributes to strengthening relationships and developing resilience in the face of ongoing cultural and climatic change.

COMPETING INTERESTS

The author has no competing interests to declare.

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