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# Louisiana's hope for a francophone future: exploring the linguistic phenomena of Acadiana's French immersion schools

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LOUISIANA'S HOPE FOR A FRANCOPHONE FUTURE:  
EXPLORING THE LINGUISTIC PHENOMENA OF ACADIANA'S FRENCH IMMERSION  
SCHOOLS

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the  
Louisiana State University and  
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By  
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## **Abstract**

Cajun and Creole French are thought of by scholars and lay-people alike as the two varieties of French spoken in Louisiana. While this may have been true to some extent in the past, the linguistic landscape of Louisiana is constantly evolving. As in other parts of the world, globalization, higher education, and an ever expanding media presence are changing the linguistic reality for Louisiana's French speaking community. The twentieth century has seen a complete shift in the status of the French language in relation to public schools in Louisiana. In the early twentieth century, many children learned French at home and were not allowed to speak it at school. By the end of the twentieth century, the sociopolitical landscape as well as the linguistic one had changed so much that children could not learn French in the home and were forced to learn it in the public school system.

In this paper, I attempt to describe in technical terms how this shift in the linguistic reality of Louisiana has changed Louisiana French itself. Many hope that Louisiana's expanding French immersion schools can help preserve the French language in Louisiana and ensure that a future generation of Louisianans will be able to take their rightful place in the Francophone world. Through my observation of French immersion students, I illustrate the ways in which the French language which will be spoken by future generations differs from that of their ancestors and I attempt to shed light on the causes of these changes. I also identify several different phenomena in Louisiana's immersion schools which warrant future linguistic research.

## **Chapter 1**

### **Introduction**

As an American child growing up outside the state of Louisiana, I lived most of my life with several basic assumptions about the state. I assumed that most of it was quite swampy, many people traveled by fan boat, and that many or most of its inhabitants spoke French and were known as Cajuns. When I first visited Louisiana at the age of eighteen, I was saddened to learn that these assumptions were largely untrue. Having lived in Baton Rouge for some time now, I know that there are a large number of swamps, and some of them are navigated by fan boat but this is far from the norm. However, the question of who is Cajun and whether or not they speak French has been much more difficult to answer in any definitive way.

When I arrived at Louisiana State University, I knew that I wanted to do field work in Louisiana, and I also wanted to study Cajun French. Yet I quickly learned that defining Cajun French is not an easy task and the line that separates Louisiana's varieties of French is not always a clear one. Furthermore, I found that finding Cajuns who actually speak French is not as easy as one might think. Though reliable numbers are difficult to find, it is generally apparent that the population of Louisiana French speakers has steadily declined in latter half of the twentieth century as the older more fluent generations pass away. Linguistic attrition has meant that many of those who do speak French in Louisiana often speak it much less completely than their parents did. Much of the research that I read focused on describing the historical forms of Louisiana French and seemed to paint a pretty bleak picture of the future of French in Louisiana.

I decided, therefore, that I would like to study Louisiana's future generation of French speakers. Louisiana's French immersion schools are widely promoted as a way of preserving Louisiana's French culture and language. Yet the schools also have many detractors who believe

that they do little to preserve the historical varieties of French found in Louisiana. I have also heard some argue that the immersion programs are ineffective and their graduates cannot speak French with a great deal of fluency. Since there is almost no systematic linguistic research which has been done to describe the French of Louisiana's immersion students, I decided that this would be an area of study that could be very helpful in understanding the current and future state of French in Louisiana. It would also be the best way of knowing exactly what variety of French is being learned in the French immersion schools of Louisiana.

Before any systematic linguistic studies could be designed, I needed to know what possible linguistic phenomena were present in the schools that would actually warrant an in-depth study. Because there has been no real linguistic research on these students to date, I decided to do a brief pilot study. My intention was to observe the immersion students in their classrooms while looking for interesting phenomena which could provide enough data for more large-scale research projects. Through my pilot study, I believe I have found exactly this type of data, and I hope that this information can help other researchers as well as myself design effective linguistic studies for the immersion schools in the near future.

On the particular day of my field research in the immersion school in Lafayette the differences between the variety of French spoken by the immersion students compared to a more traditional variety of Louisiana French were readily apparent to me. After spending the morning in class with the immersion students, I stopped for lunch on my way home in a fried chicken restaurant attached to a gas station in the small town of Breaux Bridge. As I sat eating fried crawfish and reflecting on my observations from that morning, I could not help but notice the conversation of two couples seated nearby. Directly, behind me sat a man and wife of approximately eighty years old, having a conversation with another couple of roughly the same

age in the booth across the aisle. The couples were speaking what I would characterize as Cajun French. They had apparently never met before and they were introducing themselves and telling each other where they had grown up. The couples eventually exchanged contact information. Both couples said they would like to meet again because they had enjoyed having someone else with whom they could speak French. The two couples spoke completely fluently and though their variety of French was far from the international standard, I had no problem understanding them. The variety of French spoken by these couples was quite different from the more standard variety I had heard in the immersion schools, and far more fluent. The generation of French speakers which these couples represent is rapidly disappearing, and each subsequent generation of Louisiana francophones has experienced increasing linguistic attrition. Therefore, if French is to have a future in Louisiana, then the immersion schools will surely have to be a part of it. The question for Louisiana's language planners is how to bridge the gap between these two groups of Louisiana French speakers before it is too late. I hope my research can contribute to answering this vital question for Louisiana.

### **Definitions and Disclaimers**

Several terms such as *Cajun French*, *Creole French*, and *Louisiana varieties of French* are purposefully left undefined in this thesis. I have chosen not to attempt to define these terms for several reasons. Firstly, there is often a large amount of overlap in the definitions of these different varieties of French. Furthermore, these terms are sometimes charged with sociological or political overtones which are not necessarily linguistic in nature. For my purposes, all three of these terms are used to refer to the varieties of French which have been historically present in Louisiana for several generations, and whose modern speakers did not generally learn them through classroom instruction.

Additionally, all of the names mentioned in this study are pseudonyms. The names of students and teachers have been changed to protect the anonymity of those involved. However, the transcriptions and quotations of students and teachers are as accurate as I could render them. Any translations of speech and text are my own, and represent the meanings of the speakers and authors as best I could approximate them.

## **Chapter 2**

### **Immersion Education in Louisiana**

#### **Immersion Education in General**

The term ‘immersion education’ is generally used to refer to any setting where the method of immersion is used to teach a target language. The immersion method can be used solely within the foreign language classroom to teach a target language and nothing more, or it can be used in classrooms where the subject is completely unrelated to the target language. The immersion classrooms of Louisiana use the immersion method in both of these ways. That is to say that the target language is the sole medium of communication permitted in these classrooms regardless of subject material.

Research suggests that immersion education can actually have many benefits beyond the stated purpose of second-language acquisition. However, the effectiveness of immersion education and the benefits a student can glean from it are heavily influenced by the purpose of immersion education in its specific context. There are generally two main purposes for immersion education. Either, immersion classrooms can be used to help students who already speak a minority language transition into classrooms where the majority language is used, or the immersion classrooms can be used as a form of enrichment to allow students to learn a target language. Immersion education in Louisiana is considered to be a form of enrichment because the vast majority of students in Louisiana enter the French immersion programs with little or no knowledge of French (Tornquist, 2000).

Clearly immersion education for enrichment purposes always has the goal of increasing the quality of education for the students involved. Aside from learning a foreign language,

students in immersion classrooms gain other cognitive benefits from the immersion experience. A study by Statistics Canada found that fifteen year olds enrolled in French immersion programs outperformed non-immersion students in English proficiency (2004). Another study of French immersion students in Canada by M. Swain found that “students’ scores on tests of computational and problem-solving arithmetic either matched or exceeded those of regular English program students” (as cited in Lazaruk, 2007). Yet most scholars note that these types of studies of immersion students may be affected by unrelated factors such as the socio-economic background of the students involved.

Nonetheless, immersion students do gain at least one advantage over their peers in that they learn a second language. Though immersion program results vary, just as the programs vary themselves, there is general agreement that the immersion method is more effective than more traditional methods of second language instruction. A study by Tucker Genesee found that immersion students tend to become highly proficient in their second language though native-like proficiency is rare (as cited in Lazaruk, 2007). A study of French immersion students by J. Cummins found that by the end of elementary school, most students achieve nearly native-like levels in listening and reading skills, but are easy to distinguish from native speaker peers in speaking and writing (as cited in Lazaruk, 2007). While immersion students may not become perfect bilinguals, they clearly attain high levels of proficiency in their second language.

### **Immersion Education in Louisiana**

Because immersion programs vary greatly, the origins of a program as well as the target language have an enormous influence on the program’s structure and effectiveness. The historical importance of French in Louisiana is undisputed; therefore it is not surprising that if

language immersion programs were to exist in Louisiana, they would be French immersion programs. However, the precise areas of French settlement in Louisiana as well as the groups who settled them greatly influenced how and where French immersion programs came to exist within the state.

French has been present in Louisiana from the time of its colonial origins up to the present day. Because of the dominance of the English language in the United States, the steady immigration of English-speaking settlers into Louisiana, and other socio-political factors, the usage of French in Louisiana has steadily declined since the Louisiana Purchase of 1803. Yet the decline of French usage happened much more quickly in some parts of the state than others. For various reasons, including its rural nature and often difficult terrain, the southern portion of the state west of the Mississippi river has seen a much slower decline in the usage of French than other portions of the state. In this southwest region, generally known as Acadiana, French was still widely used as a community language into the early twentieth century. The term Acadiana originates from the French colonists who had been driven out of the maritime provinces of Canada, once known as Acadia, in the eighteenth century. Today, by state law, the term Acadiana refers to twenty-two specific parishes in south-west Louisiana. Many current residents of Acadiana are descendants of these Acadian settlers, who were later known as Cajuns. The term Cajun, however, is often applied in many unrelated circumstances today.

Anecdotal illustrations of children receiving corporal punishment for speaking French in public schools abound in Louisiana. In 1921 the Louisiana Legislature passed a law prohibiting the usage of French in public schools. This law was accompanied by a general social opinion in Louisiana that those Louisianans who spoke French were uneducated or unintelligent. As a result, those Louisianans who still spoke French as a first language decided not teach French to

their children in order to avoid this stigmatization. Consequently, the number of fluent French speakers in Acadiana decreased dramatically in the early twentieth century. These events led to a political and social movement in the 1960's out of which Louisiana's immersion programs were born.

In the 1960's, many residents of Acadiana began what came to be known as the "Cajun Renaissance." Tornquist describes this movement as a generation of activists who organized "socio-cultural events like Cajun music festivals, radio programs, and television programs in vernacular French" (2000, p. 58). Cajun scholar Barry Ancelet describes the results of the Cajun Renaissance this way:

In 1968, the state of Louisiana officially recognized the Cajun cultural revival which had been brewing under the leadership of certain musicians and political leaders such as Dewey Balfa and Dudley LeBlanc. In that year, it created the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) which...began its efforts on political, psychological and educational fronts to erase the stigma Louisianans had long attached to the French language and culture (1989, p. 40)

Louisiana legislative act 409 commissioned CODOFIL to "do any and all things necessary to accomplish the development, utilization, and preservation of the French language as found in Louisiana for the cultural, economic and touristic benefit of the state" (CODOFIL). The first chairman of CODOFIL was an attorney and politician from Lafayette, Louisiana named James Domengeaux. While many hoped and assumed that CODOFIL would promote Louisiana vernacular styles of French known commonly as Cajun and Creole French, the organization seemed to take a different direction from the beginning. Under Domengeaux's leadership,

CODOFIL was accused of promoting “standard” or “academic” French. According to Tornquist, “The principle objective was, therefore, to create new generations of Louisianans bilingual and literate in standard French” (2000, p. 59).

Domengeaux was well-known for stating that the schools had destroyed French in Louisiana so the schools should revive it. Therefore, CODOFIL’s main objective became promoting French in Louisiana through education. In 1968, along with creating CODOFIL, the Louisiana legislature passed act 714 which stated that all public schools in Louisiana, whether or not they were located in Francophone areas, were required to offer 5 years of French instruction at the elementary level and three years at the secondary level (Boudreaux and Guidry, 1999 as cited in Tornquist, 2000). In order to fill the new demand for French teachers, CODOFIL began arranging for French teachers from Europe and Canada as well as other Francophone regions to come teach in Louisiana. This process of importing teachers from abroad has been the modus operandi of CODOFIL up to the present day. Some believe the motivation behind importing foreign teachers was to ensure that standard French rather than Louisiana vernacular varieties was taught in schools. However, it is doubtful whether a sufficient number of French speakers qualified to teach were living in Louisiana at the time.

As the Cajun Renaissance of the 1960’s waned, vernacular French continued its decline in Louisiana. Tornquist states that the objective of creating new generations of functional bilinguals was far from being realized and administrators noted that one French language course per day did not allow students sufficient language exposure to become functionally bilingual. Thus, in the 1980’s, some administrators, inspired by French immersion programs in the Anglophone regions of Canada, decided to start the first French immersion programs in Louisiana (2000, p2). Though the French immersion programs in Canada may seem to be a very

appropriate model, the expectations of parents and the community were quite different in Louisiana.

The historical and cultural significance of French in Louisiana, as well as the existence of CODOFIL, creates a very different and difficult situation for immersion schools in Louisiana. Tornquist observes that “the situation of French in Louisiana is characteristic of situations of decline, in which are found numerous minority languages in the world” (2000, p.1). Like the Irish language, the Maori language in New Zealand, or the Breton language in France, the cultural importance of French in Louisiana creates an environment where the community expects immersion programs to do more than simply create well-educated students. Many expect CODOFIL to help their children become bilingual like their grandparents were. The French speakers of Louisiana have one advantage that most minority language speakers in a situation of decline do not, in that there is a large community of French speakers outside Louisiana from which to draw teachers and other forms of support for their efforts. James Domengeaux desired for CODOFIL to help Louisiana become a part of the world’s Francophone community. However, the fact that foreign teachers know little, if anything, about Louisiana’s vernacular varieties of French creates tension among many involved with Acadiana’s immersion programs.

“Because the Francophone population of Louisiana continues to age, the learning of French as a second language at school has almost completely replaced the natural acquisition of French at home in Louisiana” (Tornquist 2000, p. 40). In this context, it seemed immersion education was the only possible way to create a new generation of French bilinguals in Acadiana. Tornquist states that the first public school French immersion program in Louisiana began in East Baton Rouge Parish in 1981 and though this initial program was forced to close shortly thereafter because of lack of interest, seven other parishes began French immersion programs

throughout the eighties and nineties (2000). Olson Beal (2008) claims the first immersion program started in St. Martin parish and St.-Hilaire (2005) believes that the first program started in Calcasieu parish. Wherever the first program may have started, there are now immersion programs in eight parishes, including a new one in East Baton Rouge Parish. The exact number of students in these programs is not available, but during the 2008-2009 school year approximately 3,000 students were enrolled in Louisiana's immersion programs (Barnett, 2010, p. 30)

In general, immersion programs vary greatly around the world. Some immersion schools conduct 100% of their classes in the target language; these are called full immersion schools. Because of state education guidelines, full immersion is not possible in Louisiana public schools. While each parish runs its immersion program independently, there is a consortium of Louisiana immersion schools which sets standards that all of the schools try to meet. The Consortium of Louisiana immersion schools encourages that 60% of classroom instruction be conducted in the target language (Tornquist 2000, p.94). For logical reasons, French language arts is conducted in French at all Louisiana immersion schools, but the individual program administrators are responsible for deciding which other courses are conducted in French. Some schools have an inadequate number of immersion teachers and are forced to reduce the number of courses taught in French.

While parishes may oversee and even encourage French immersion programs, individual schools must take the initiative to start them. Lisa Tornquist describes the process this way:

In general, the principal takes the initiative to start an immersion program in Acadiana. First it is necessary to question the parents to verify that there is enough interest in the

community to justify an immersion program. Up to this point, I have never heard of there ever not being enough interest in a community to merit an immersion program in Acadiana. The obstacles are normally at the administrative level of the school or the parish (2000, p.95).

Because of the politics of parish school boards and budgetary constraints, many communities with a large population of French speakers do not have immersion schools while other cities with relatively few French speakers do. Calcasieu parish, for example has had a French immersion program in place since 1983 while only 5% of the parish population claims to speak French (Modern Language Association). Yet Vermilion parish where more than 24% of the population claims to speak French has no French immersion programs (Modern Language Association).

Even when a French immersion program is approved by a parish school board, there are often non-academic factors which can limit the effectiveness of a program. There is a noted phenomenon in Louisiana where less affluent schools have a much easier time being approved for an immersion program than more affluent ones. In St. Landry parish, for example, two schools made a request to start a French immersion program in the same year. One school was located in Eunice, in a relatively prosperous neighborhood. The other school, South Street Elementary in Opelousas, was located in a more modest neighborhood. Though South Street lacked a librarian and even music and art teachers at the time, it was awarded the program. It seems that parish school boards try to use immersion programs to turn underprivileged schools into magnet schools in hopes that the types of students attracted to the immersion programs can help transform the schools (Tornquist 2000, p. 96). Another researcher even points out the explicit use of magnet schools as a tool for desegregation (Olson Beal 2008).

One result of placing immersion programs in underprivileged schools in Acadiana is that race often becomes an issue. Tornquist states that

In effect, in many schools in Acadiana, there exists a racial inequality in the immersion programs. The large majority of students are of Caucasian origin which is not representative of the ethnicity of the region. Even in the areas where the inhabitants are primarily people of color, (Vermilion in Lafayette for example) a large number of students in the immersion programs are white and come from neighborhoods outside of the school zone to participate in the immersion (2000, p.91).

Another sociological peculiarity of these immersion programs stems from the fact that only a small minority of students in most schools are actually participating in the immersion program. As a result, the immersion students spend large amounts of time together separated from the other students, which has been observed to result in very exclusive social cliques being created among the immersion students. The students in Acadiana's immersion programs also tend to perform better academically. Tornquist explains that as immersion students advance through elementary school many parents remove their children from the immersion programs if they begin to struggle with any subjects because they mistakenly believe that it is the French language that is causing their child to struggle rather than consider the possibility that their student is simply not as gifted in that subject area (2000, p.90). The removal of struggling immersion students by their parents usually results in very homogenous immersion programs which have only the most gifted students as participants. The resultant racial, social, and intellectual homogeneity of immersion programs often causes some in the community to view these programs as elitist.

CODOFIL continues to provide the majority of teachers to Acadiana's immersion schools. Most teachers in Acadiana's immersion programs are not Louisiana natives. Most are not even from the United States. In the school year 1999-2000, Lafayette Parish employed 110 immersion program teachers, of whom 82 (composed of 32 Belgians, 22 Canadians, 21 French, 3 Africans, 1 French Guyanan, and 1 Pole) were part of CODOFIL's Foreign Associate Teacher program (Tornquist 2000, p. 100). There has been little change in this ratio over the past ten years. During the 2008-2009 school year, 125 of 160 Louisiana immersion teachers were from outside the United States (Barnett, 2010, p. 32). These Foreign Associate Teachers are typically given 3 year visas and most are unable or choose not to stay beyond that time. The positions are not particularly well paid and often employ foreign teachers with little or no experience. These factors combined with the constant flow of changing foreign teachers provide logical impediments to the success of immersion programs in Acadiana.

For various reasons including state educational requirements, there are no true immersion programs in Acadiana public schools that go beyond eighth grade. In some parishes, high schools offer special French writing and literature courses for immersion students, however no subjects besides French are taught in French at the high school level. As previously stated, which subjects are taught in French vary from parish to parish and even school to school. The materials used in immersion classrooms can also vary greatly. Some teachers create their own materials. Some parishes and schools purchase French textbooks and materials for their teachers to use, while some teachers use English textbooks and simply discuss them in French. Due to this great lack of uniformity among immersion programs, any detailed study of immersion in Acadiana requires focusing on a single parish or school.

## **Immersion in Lafayette Parish**

Because Lafayette is the largest city in Acadiana, it is quite logical that Lafayette Parish also has the largest immersion program. Six schools have immersion programs in Lafayette Parish. Five elementary schools have immersion programs which all feed into a single middle school program. One middle school immersion program appears to be sufficient in Lafayette Parish. Attrition is quite high within elementary school immersion programs and many parents choose to withdraw their children from the immersion program after elementary school for various reasons.

Lafayette parish gave the following program objectives in a publication distributed among the parents of immersion students:

- To communicate fluently (understand, speak, read and write) in French about subjects appropriate to their age
- To succeed in all subjects of the curriculum (and standardized tests) as well as students outside of the immersion program
- To recognize the cultural, intellectual, and historic contributions done in the United States and everywhere in the world by members of francophone communities
- To acquire a deeper understanding and appreciation of other cultures in order to understand and appreciate the differences in their own lives
- To acquire a competence in French and English that will permit them to continue their studies in both languages

- To understand and learn to appreciate other cultural groups while developing their own cultural identity
- To deepen their self-awareness and other ways of thinking and expressing themselves (Tornquist 2000, p. 99)

These are the objectives which students who begin the program in kindergarten and continue through fifth grade should accomplish. The Lafayette Parish School Board tries to communicate to parents that the program is meant to last six years with the option to continue in middle school. The school board discourages parents from placing students in the program if they are not committed to finishing. During the 2004-2005 school year, parents applying to enter their children in kindergarten immersion programs were asked to sign the following statement of commitment:

- I. I have read and understood the “Special Conditions” under which the French Immersion Program operates in Lafayette Parish. I am satisfied that I understand the underlying philosophy and goals of the program. I understand that French will be the main language of instruction during my child’s school day.
- II. I understand that the French Immersion Program in Lafayette Parish is designed to follow my child throughout his/her educational career. In filing this application for French Immersion, I am committing to my child’s participation in the program for the duration of his/her elementary school years.

- III. I understand that my child may be removed from the program if she/he experiences serious academic, social or psychological difficulties within the immersion environment. Such a decision would be made by a committee consisting of counselors, teachers, administrators and parents. However, I understand that fluctuations in academic performance can be normal in a child's school career and that a low grade does not necessarily indicate a difficulty with the immersion setting.
- IV. To the best of my knowledge, my family intends to reside in Lafayette Parish for the next five years.
- V. I understand that the Lafayette Parish School Board is not responsible for providing transportation to out-of-zone immersion school sites. I understand that all students must follow school schedules for student arrival and dismissal. (2004-2005 Lafayette Parish French Immersion program kindergarten application)

The fact that most immersion teachers are Foreign Associate Teachers, and that bringing them to Acadiana entails great cost and organization on the part of CODOFIL, makes it very important that students do not leave the immersion program in large numbers from year to year.

Once a child has completed the fifth grade, however, they are free to continue in immersion or leave the program as they desire. Because there is only one middle school level immersion program in the parish, many practical difficulties often keep students from being able to participate in immersion through eighth grade.

## **Paul Breaux Middle School**

The parish's sixth through eighth grade immersion program is located at Paul Breaux Middle School near the center of the city of Lafayette. This program represents the culmination of immersion efforts in Lafayette Parish. Those students whose parents wish for them to continue in immersion after fifth grade must go to Paul Breaux. The school is located near the downtown portion of the city of Lafayette, and most of the elementary school immersion programs take place in other parts of the city. Thus, many of the children in the elementary school immersion programs live outside of the Paul Breaux school district in other parts of town.

The middle school immersion program in Lafayette was not always located at Paul Breaux. The program was previously located at Edgar Martin Middle School in another part of the city. The transfer of the program from Edgar Martin to Paul Breaux was the subject of a public meeting in Lafayette. Lisa Tornquist describes the circumstances surrounding the relocation of the immersion program this way:

The problems of elitism and racism were present in an implicit way at the public meeting about the transfer of the program from Edgar Martin, situated in an affluent neighborhood in the south of Lafayette, to Paul Breaux, a school situated in the north of the city in a community less affluent and more varied on a racial level. The majority of parents present at the meeting were against the changing of the school. They didn't want their children to be transported to the other side of town, and they were worried about their safety. To change the opinion of the parents, the administrators had to underline the fact that the program for gifted children was already located at Paul Breaux. This argument comforted and won over the majority of the parents who were originally against the

changing of the school. This rapprochement of the immersion program and that of the gifted children reassured them (2000, p. 93).

If some parents do indeed feel the way Tornquist describes, then the location of the program at Paul Breaux may be limiting the number of children who attend.

In Paul Breaux's immersion program, students take three classes per day in French: Science, Social Studies, and French language arts. This means that the majority of the students' school-day is spent in English-speaking classroom environments. In 2000, a study of Acadiana immersion schools, including Paul Breaux, was conducted by Lisa Tornquist. The responses to the questionnaire she distributed to the parents of immersion program students provide a detailed picture of the demographics of the program's participants.

According to her study, 87% of immersion student parents at Paul Breaux were married. This number is obviously much higher than national averages. The study also found 79% of immersion students had a family with a household income above \$40,000. That means that only about 20% of immersion students lived in homes with a household income below the median for that year (U.S. Census Bureau). The study also found much higher than average rates of education among parents. If these numbers are still relatively accurate today, then the overwhelming majority of immersion students at Paul Breaux seem to come from strong socio-economic backgrounds.

Tornquist's study also found that 91% of Paul Breaux immersion students had no knowledge of French before they began immersion education. Thus the French spoken by students at Paul Breaux can reasonably be considered an accurate reflection of the level and variety of French learned by immersion students in Lafayette. Since Paul Breaux's immersion

program represents the terminal stage of Lafayette's French immersion programs, it is the ideal location to perform an overall evaluation of the program's results.

## **Conclusion**

History, politics, demographics, and the hopes of the community all play a part in shaping the immersion programs of Acadiana. Just as the city of Lafayette is seen as the capitol of Cajun country in Louisiana, so its immersion program is one of the most developed. Nevertheless, only one of twelve middle schools in Lafayette parish offers French immersion, and only a small minority of students at Paul Breaux Middle school takes part in that program. For minority language advocates in Louisiana, this situation may appear bleak, but it is a marked improvement over the situation of the previous fifty years and there is no reason why it cannot improve in the future.

## **Chapter 3**

### **Research Methodology**

#### **Purpose**

My intention with this field research was to perform a preliminary study in order to learn if there were indeed linguistic phenomena present in the immersion school which warranted further research and, if so, what they were. I hoped that the phonetic, phonological, and/or syntactic features of the variety of French spoken by Acadiana's immersion students might be unique enough to warrant a future systematic study. Several sociolinguistic features such as language attitudes and discourse analysis are possible topics of future study as well. Given the existence of native varieties of French in Acadiana, I also hoped to see how, if at all, the French spoken by immersion students is different from or similar to the native Louisiana varieties. However, prior to my study, I feared it might be possible that the linguistic competence and performance of the immersion students would not be sufficient to provide adequate data for any further studies.

#### **Acadiana Immersion Schools in Academic Literature**

Before conducting any research of my own, I needed to know what research had already been done regarding the French immersion programs of Louisiana. I found three published dissertations on the subject of Acadiana's immersion schools. Furthermore there were quite a few articles published which presented research conducted on Louisiana's immersion schools in one way or another. Unfortunately, most of the research conducted in Acadiana's immersion schools up until this point has been more sociological or pedagogical and less linguistic in nature. One dissertation on the subject of the immersion program in East Baton Rouge Parish describes the literature on the subject this way:

In spite of the prevalence of immersion programs in Louisiana, there is a paucity of published research available on these programs. No article in either *Foreign Language Annals* or *The Modern Language Journal* – the two main foreign language education journals– mentions immersion education in Louisiana. Only a few authors (e.g. Caldas & Boudreaux, 1999; Caldas & Caron-Caldas, 2000; St.-Hilaire, 2005) have published their work on Louisiana immersion education. This lack of published research is particularly significant because Louisiana has the highest actual number of immersion programs in the United States. (Olson Beal, 2008, p. 11)

My research led me to the same conclusion: that there is an obvious lack of written research on the subject of Louisiana's immersion schools, and particularly a lack of linguistic research. To my knowledge only two systematic linguistic studies have ever been conducted in the immersion schools of Acadiana. However, these two studies do provide some useful and interesting linguistic information, particularly regarding language attitudes.

Brian Barnett defended a dissertation in 2010 which addressed the attitudes of French Immersion teachers toward Louisiana varieties of French. His dissertation provides a fair amount of background information about the immersion schools in Louisiana, and he provides particularly detailed information about the numbers of immersion teachers and their nationalities. Barnett seems to conclude that better hiring practices and training techniques need to be put into place by CODOFIL in order to increase the presence of Louisiana French within Louisiana's immersion schools.

Lisa Tornquist published a dissertation on language attitudes in Acadiana's immersion school at the University of Louisiana in Lafayette in 2000. This dissertation represents the most

complete linguistic research conducted in Louisiana's immersion schools to date. Though the dissertation focuses primarily on the linguistic attitudes of parents and teachers involved in the program, it provides extensive information on the history, function, and demographics of the programs as well. Her research provides extremely detailed information and statistics on the families of Acadiana immersion students.

Two more dissertations have been written about research conducted in Louisiana's immersion schools. Michelle Haj-Broussard submitted a dissertation to Louisiana State University in 2003 which chronicles her research into the effects of immersion education on African-American children in Acadiana. Though primarily pedagogical and sociological in nature, Haj-Broussard provides a thorough description of the classroom environment found in Acadiana's immersion schools as well as several student interviews which are useful from a linguistic standpoint. Similarly, Heather Olson Beal submitted a dissertation to Louisiana State University in 2008 chronicling her case study of one Baton Rouge immersion school as a model for racial integration. Like Haj-Broussard's, most of Olson Beal's information is more sociological and pedagogical in nature, but she too provides detailed descriptions of language uses within the school.

Of the remaining published literature on Louisiana's French immersion programs, several articles by Stephen Caldas provide useful and unique linguistic information. These articles describe the language attitudes and linguistic behaviors of three immersion students using a real-time diachronic study. Though his sample size is extremely small and the scope of his study is rather limited, his case study provides the only real linguistic research conducted to date which focuses on the linguistic behavior of students in Louisiana French immersion programs.

Considering that Louisiana's immersion students most likely represent the future generation of

Louisiana French speakers, further study on the linguistic behavior of this group is extremely important to understanding the continuous development of Louisiana varieties of French.

### **Contacting the Immersion Schools**

In order to assess the variety of French in Acadiana's immersion programs, one must assess the abilities of the students who have completed the program. On a practical level this requires working with students in the public schools. I decided that the best way to assess the results of the immersion programs would be to study those students who had nearly completed the immersion school process but had not yet left the program. Since no public high schools in Acadiana have immersion programs, eighth grade is the farthest a student can progress in immersion. Although at least one other parish has an immersion program which continues up to the eighth grade, the Lafayette parish program seemed the best representation for multiple reasons. Lafayette parish has the largest immersion program in Louisiana in terms of participating schools, and most of its schools are located relatively close to interstate highways and not far from Baton Rouge.

Because of their status as minors, proper authorization is required before any field research can be conducted. I initially contacted the director of CODOFIL who was able to give me the contact information for the director of the immersion programs of Lafayette Parish. Though she was on sabbatical at the time, she was able to tell me via email what steps I would need to take in order to gain permission to conduct research in the immersion program at Paul Breaux Middle school. She informed me that I would need the permission of Paul Breaux's principal, but before contacting her I would need the permission of the Lafayette Parish Deputy Superintendent. After corresponding through email with the Parish administration, I was given a

list of guidelines for conducting research in the parish schools as well as an application to conduct research. The Lafayette Parish school board provides the following policy statement regarding academic research:

It shall be the policy of the Lafayette Parish School Board to cooperate with research agencies, institutions, colleges and universities in conducting potentially useful educational research in our school system. The Superintendent shall establish committees, within the appropriate departments, to review such requests. (Lafayette Parish guidelines for conducting research projects/graduate study)

The faculty and staff of the Lafayette Parish school system were extremely helpful and cooperative in accordance with this policy.

The school board has further guidelines to which they require researchers adhere. In addition to outlining the purpose and methods of my research to the school board, I was required to follow the guidelines below:

1. The research/graduate study shall be designed to produce valid and reliable results.
2. The research/graduate study shall be reviewed by a committee appointed by the Superintendent prior to the start of the research project. The committee will make a recommendation for approval to the Superintendent. The Superintendent will make the final approval decision of the research/graduate study.
3. The research/graduate study shall be of educational benefit.
4. The research/graduate study shall not be disruptive to normal operational procedures.
5. All questionnaires or instruments designed to gather data shall be submitted to the committee in advance and must ensure anonymity and/or confidentiality of subjects and must not include items which invade the area of personal rights. Anonymity and/or confidentiality must be ensured by the research design when data collected includes status, race, creed, or other personal information of subjects. It is the responsibility of the

research/graduate study to provide documentation to the committee as to the procedures to ensure anonymity and /or confidentiality.

6. Confidentiality and/or anonymity for staff, students and all research subjects shall be ensured.
7. Staff and students have the right to refuse to participate in the study or to withdraw from the research study at any time.
8. Information shall be provided to parents as needed regarding the type of research to be conducted when students are included.
9. Student projects shall have prior written approval of a faculty member of the institution. This faculty member shall have some responsibility related to the student's project.
10. There shall be an agreement with the researcher that the Lafayette Parish School Board will have access to the results of the study, and an opportunity to use the results as needed. (Lafayette Parish guidelines for conducting research projects/graduate study)

I submitted a written request to perform research at Paul Breaux Middle School along with a signed statement that I would adhere to the parish's research guidelines. Because of technical difficulties involving email exchange, communication with the Parish School board was sometimes slow. I was asked to provide further explanation regarding my research proposal over the phone. In my written research proposal I suggested I might ask students to take language comprehension and production tests, and the parish administration had some concern about how and when these tests would be conducted. However, I explained that no testing would be conducted during my preliminary research, and I had merely mentioned testing as a method which could be used if I decide to pursue further research in the parish immersion school. With this clarification, I received written permission to conduct research at Paul Breaux Middle School.

The parish school board's foreign language coordinator assisted me by contacting the school on my behalf and arranging an appropriate date and time for my visit. In order to observe the normal linguistic behavior of the students, I hoped to observe them interacting with their teachers and each other while going about their normal daily activities. I requested that I be allowed to observe the students on a day when there was no testing or other unusual activity planned in their classes which might hinder me from observing their normal linguistic behavior.

### **In-class Methods**

I followed one group of approximately thirty students to all three of their classes which took place in French on Thursday October 29, 2009. I held a brief discussion with all three teachers, and after observing the final immersion class I was able to conduct one very brief informal interview with the class as a whole.

While in the classroom, I tried to sit in the back or to the side so that I would not be a distraction to the students and in hopes that my presence would not alter their behavior. I used a small digital audio recording device to record the linguistic interactions between students and the teacher during each class. I collected copies of worksheets used in class. I took notes on interesting socio-linguistic interactions. I also made some phonetic transcriptions of student and teacher utterances which illustrated interesting or unusual phonological properties.

Using these methods, I observed the eighth grade immersion students throughout their first three classes of the day. The classes were science, French language arts, and social studies in that order. I also performed some brief interviews with teachers between classes. During the social studies class, their teacher offered to allow me to interview the class as a whole during the last few minutes. I asked the students several questions related to their linguistic attitudes,

perceptions and behaviors, as well as their exposure to French outside of the classroom. Though I could have continued to observe the students for the entire day, I decided against any further observation. The roughly three hours of recording I had made provided ample material for data analysis. The recorded interview with the students as well as my brief recorded interviews with teachers provided several interesting ideas for further research.

The questions that I posed to the students and teachers were chosen because of their salience to the hypotheses I had formed about the French spoken by immersion students in Acadiana based on the literature I had read. Most literature on the subject of immersion education speaks of deficiencies in oral and written production of the target language which clearly differentiate immersion students from their native-speaker peers. I, therefore, asked the teachers questions related to these qualities. Additionally, some literature on immersion makes reference to the fact that immersion students tend never to speak with one another in French when it is not obligatory. I asked the teachers questions regarding the frequency with which the students speak French and English. Despite having little scientific evidence, anecdotal accounts had led me to hypothesize that Louisiana's immersion students may have difficulty understanding native Louisiana French speakers, therefore I asked the students questions related to their perceptions of Louisiana French as well as their contact with French outside of the immersion school context.

### **Analyzing and Presenting the Data**

In accordance with the school's guidelines for research, I have made efforts to preserve the anonymity of the students, teachers, and administrators involved in the research. All teachers and students have been given pseudonyms, and even I am unaware of which particular students

made certain utterances which I recorded. I did not record any information on the specific students whose utterances I noted in my journal, nor was it even possible to identify which student was speaking in most the classroom recordings. Unfortunately due to the nature of the classrooms and my desire to be unobtrusive many portions of the recordings could not be interpreted because of their poor quality. However, those utterances which have been transcribed from the recordings were done so only if they could be clearly understood.

## **Chapter 4**

### **Observations**

#### **My Arrival**

As I approached Paul Breaux Middle School in my car, the school's environs suggested to me that Tornquist was correct in assessing this part of town as "less affluent" (2000, p. 9). It was a rather gloomy Thursday in late October of 2009. After parking my car I entered the building near the main office. I had arrived early before the first bell as I had been instructed to do, and the students were arriving at the same time. The building, itself, seemed relatively unremarkable. It was neither in great disrepair nor was it new. I walked into the office and after waiting behind several students who were addressing their needs with the office staff I informed one of the staff behind the desk that I was a graduate student from Louisiana State University there to observe a classroom. Without asking any questions, they asked me to have a seat and wait until the bell rang to start class then I would be escorted to the appropriate classroom. I had been told by the school board to bring my letter of authorization to perform research with me, but no one ever asked to see any documentation. I took a seat in one of the many chairs that surrounded a coffee table in the office.

The business in the office seemed very normal. Students and parents came and went after obtaining permission for students to leave school early or enter late and other such requests. One middle-aged woman whom I presumed to be a parent took a seat beside me and eventually asked why I was at the school. I told her that I was a graduate student there to observe a class, which she took to mean that I was studying education and preparing to take a teacher certification test. After several remarks encouraging me that I would do fine on the teacher certification test, I was able to inform her I was actually studying linguistics and that I had come to the school to observe

the French Immersion program. After my clarification she seemed either unaware of what the French immersion program was or what linguistics meant, and she quickly ended the conversation.

Eventually the flow of entering students slowed and the office waiting area began to clear out shortly before the bell rang at 8:30am. I was asked to sign in and take a name tag. After I had done this, one of the staff asked who I was there to observe and I informed them that I was there to observe the French immersion program. The staff took this to mean that I was there to observe a French class, and I informed them that I thought the first class I was to observe was a social studies class in the French immersion program. The staff continued to debate among themselves whom they thought I was there to observe and eventually decided upon a particular social studies teacher. They gave me directions to a classroom and I proceeded towards the class even though I was not confident that they understood which classes I wanted to observe.

I arrived in a somewhat large classroom where a teacher was giving the students some instructions in English. I introduced myself and informed her that I was there to observe a French immersion science and social studies class, and she surmised that the office staff had misunderstood my purpose. This teacher informed me that the French immersion classes were located in a different building. She asked her class if any students knew where the French immersion classrooms were located, and about half of the class raised their hands. One volunteer was chosen to walk me over to the building where the French immersion classes were located.

The parish school board had informed me that a Monsieur Baptiste would arrange my visit for me. Though I had neglected to write down his name, which would have been helpful in

eliminating the confusion among the office staff, I was eventually led to his classroom by the student volunteer from the other class. I entered the room and introduced myself in French to the man whom I assumed to be Monsieur Baptiste. The teacher smiled and shook my hand. But when I began to explain my purpose in French, the teacher stopped me and told me in English that he was a substitute and the man I was looking for was not there that day. I surmised that the man did not speak much, if any, French so I explained my purpose in English. He did not seem to know exactly what I should do, at which point I asked if the class I was currently in was an eighth grade class. He informed me that this was sixth-grade French, and asked the students if they knew where the eighth-grade immersion class was at the moment. The students began to attempt to speak to me directly in French rather than address the teacher. After answering a few of their questions in French about my identity and purpose, another student volunteer was chosen to guide me to a science class upstairs in the same building. After my visit, I concluded that if anyone at the school was informed about my visit beforehand, it was only Monsieur Baptiste who happened to be absent that day.

The French immersion program at Paul Breaux is located in an annex building which is attached to the main building by a covered walkway. The immersion program takes up several classrooms which are all located next to each other in the upper and lower portions of this building. The posters and decorations in the hallways of this building are all in French. On the second floor of the building I was guided to the science class of a Madame Diouf. Her name had been mentioned to me in my correspondence with the parish school board, so I was starting to become confident that I was finally in the correct location.

Madame Diouf is a science teacher from Africa. I was never able to ascertain her country of origin, but her accent was unmistakably African. I entered her classroom and introduced

myself in French and explained my purpose. My communications with the school board led me to believe that the teachers whom I wished to observe had been informed of the date and time of my visit. Madame Diouf was unaware that I would be coming, but after I explained my purpose she had no problem with my observation of her class or with the fact that I wished to make an audio recording.

### **Science Class**

The desks in Madame Diouf's class were arranged in groups of four or five desks pushed together facing each other. This arrangement allowed the students to share materials and interact easily during experiments, but it also meant that not every student sat facing the teacher or the blackboard during the lecture. I sat at a table on one side of the room in what I thought would be an inconspicuous and non-distracting place. As I prepared my journal and recorder, one student from each group of desks collected some forms from the students in his group and brought them to Madame Diouf at the back of the room.

Madame Diouf, after collecting these papers, instructed the students to open their books to a certain page and moved to the front of the room. The text books were in English, but Madame Diouf asked all questions regarding the book in French. Madame Diouf spoke exclusively in French throughout the entire class. The students' first activity was to go over the answers to several questions from their science book regarding cells. My recording begins with a student attempting to answer one of the questions in French before Madame Diouf interrupts her and tells her that "On va pas crier la réponse comme ça" (We're not going to shout the answer like that).

Madame then asks the students to read question thirteen, at which point the entire class begins to read the question in unison in English. Interestingly, when the students begin reading the multiple-choice answers in English, they pronounce one word in French though it is written in English. The word that the students pronounce in French is *cytoplasm*. Admittedly, the only spelling difference between the English word *cytoplasm* and its French equivalent is an *e* at the end. It is interesting to note, however, that the students read only this one word in French and none of the other responses which could have been just as easily translated. The recording is transcribed as follows:

*Students in unison* – [eɪ sɪt<sup>h</sup>ɒp<sup>h</sup>læzmə bɪ nuk<sup>h</sup>lɪjəs sɪ k<sup>h</sup>lɔ.ɹɒp<sup>h</sup>læzm di sɛl mɪmbɹeɪn]

The students' production of [sɪt<sup>h</sup>ɒp<sup>h</sup>læzmə] corresponds almost perfectly to a standard French pronunciation as opposed to a standard American English pronunciation such as [saɪt<sup>h</sup>ɒp<sup>h</sup>læzm]. I did record in my field notes that the students around me clearly aspirated their voiceless stops in this utterance which will be addressed in more detail later. I speculate that this word may have been pronounced in French for two possible reasons. Firstly, Madame Diouf had said the same word in French moments earlier. Secondly, perhaps the students may have never heard the English pronunciation of this word because it is a low frequency word for most Americans and therefore it is possible that their French immersion classroom is the only context in which they have ever heard the word pronounced. Obviously, any firm conclusions would require more data.

When reading the answers to the next question, all of the students produced standard English pronunciations. Yet when one particular student was asked a follow-up question, he responds from memory with the French pronunciation [lizɔzɔm] as opposed to the English

[laisəsomz]. This situation may be further evidence that French immersion students tend to acquire only the French pronunciations of low-frequency academic terms. The lysosome exchange ends the discussion of the homework questions, and class begins a new topic.

Madame Diouf informs the students that they are about to do a brief revision of the topic discussed the day before. While the students look for the pages in the book and their notes which addressed yesterday's topic, their teacher asks all of the students to give their progress reports to a student named James. Madame Diouf uses the phrase "Donnez tous les progress reports à James." The term *progress report* is the only English term which Madame Diouf uses during the entire class. This term may remain untranslated because of its administrative and school-wide nature since the administrative tasks of the school are conducted exclusively in English. A conclusion about this speculation would also require further data.

The students review their previous lesson by raising their hands and naming the three types of rocks they had discussed the day before. Madame Diouf writes the names of the rocks on the blackboard as the students volunteer to name them. The entire discussion takes place in French and the students give several names for igneous rocks in French such as *volcanique*, *magmatique* and *éruptive*. Madame Diouf then states that maybe she should give a quiz on the rocks, and tells them that they seem ready for a brief quiz. The students look at one another with looks of confusion and dread at the suggestion of a quiz and one student says "no" in English. Madame Diouf then smiles and says she does not intend to give a quiz.

Madame Diouf then asks the students to name the other two major types of rocks. Two students volunteer the terms *sédimentaire* and *métamorphique*. The exchange which followed

these responses illustrated several important features and is transcribed below in its entirety.<sup>1</sup>

- M. Diouf : C'est la première fois pendant très longtemps qu'on est prêt pour un quiz ...métamorphique. Quelqu'un me dit comment se forme une roche ignée.
- James : Dans le volcan
- M. Diouf : Elle se forme dans un volcan ?
- James : ...[unintelligible mubling]
- M. Diouf : Oui, Je l'entends pas. James, Je crois que tu peux parler un peu plus fort.
- James : Elle forme après un volcan érupte [*sic*]
- M. Diouf : Oui
- James : Ça va sur la terre
- M. Diouf : Qu'est-ce qu'y va sur la terre ?
- James : le lave [*sic*]
- M. Diouf : La lave...Ok
- James : ...(whispers to himself) la lave
- M. Diouf : Ok la lave va sur la terre et puis après...qu'est-ce qu'y arrive à cette lave là ?
- James : se refroidir et [*sic*]
- M. Diouf : Elle se refroidit, et puis après qu'elle se refroidit elle fait quoi...elle devient...
- James : une roche ?
- M. Diouf : Elle devient...
- James : solide ?
- M. Diouf : Elle devient solide. Elle devient dure et puis le lendemain elle devient une roche, un jour après elle devient une roche ?
- James : Il prend...

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<sup>1</sup> For an English translation see Appendix

- M. Diouf : Ça prend
- James : Ça prend un millier d'années
- M. Diouf : Ça prend beaucoup d'années, ça prend des milliers milliers d'années avant que cette lave qui est durcie devient une roche

This discourse provides illustrations of several common occurrences observed during student interactions with teachers.

As seen in the conversation between James and Madame Diouf, the teachers appeared to have a tendency to either complete the sentences of students in French or elaborate on them. This phenomenon was also observed by Michelle Haj-Broussard in the elementary immersion programs of Acadiana (2003). At some points Madame Diouf even seems to interrupt James to provide a more complete or grammatically correct answer. The answers provided by James also illustrate another phenomenon observed by Haj-Broussard, in that he rarely speaks in complete sentences. This tendency of students to speak in incomplete sentences which are then finished by the teacher may be the norm in all of Acadiana's immersion schools. This phenomenon was present throughout the immersion classes I observed at Paul Breaux. A more systematic discourse analysis within the immersion schools could provide clues to the nature of this phenomenon.

The grammatical errors produced by James in his conversation with Madame Diouf were representative of the types of errors which were very common among the Paul Breaux students during my observations. James fails to make gender agreement between the article and the French word for lava, and Madame Diouf quickly corrects him. My recording reveals that James did repeat the phrase using the correct article under his breath. Problems with grammatical

gender agreement are extremely common for Anglophones attempting to learn a second language that has grammatical gender. Also, it would be quite logical for low-frequency words, such as the word for lava in this case, to increase the likelihood that a speaker would make such an error. Yet, observations made later in the day lead me to believe that the frequency of the word in question is not the root cause of these grammatical gender errors. Additionally, James failed to conjugate the verb *refroidir*. Thus gender is not the only cause of grammatical error among students.

The class continued their discussion of rocks. One student provided granite as an example of an igneous rock. Madame Diouf reminded the students not to abbreviate the terms she is writing on the board. She explains that she is abbreviating the terms simply to save space on the board, but she reminds the students that if they abbreviate in their notes they will have trouble understanding them later. Next, Madame Diouf discusses the two types of igneous rock with the class. She provides them with the terms extrusive and intrusive. She then asks the students what word they see within the word extrusive. One student volunteers the word *extérieur* which Madame Diouf uses to explain that extrusive rocks are given this name because they form on the exterior of a volcano. Another student was able to identify the word *intérieur* within the word *intrusive*, which Madame Diouf used to explain the nature of an intrusion. I recorded in my field notes during this discussion that Madame Diouf used a flap or a trill for the /r/ phoneme, though none of the students did. Her pronunciation did not seem to provide any difficulties in comprehension for the students.

As the students continued their review by identifying the word sediment within the word sedimentary, the intercom interrupted the class. The brief but loud announcement in English did not hinder the class from immediately resuming their conversation in French. In similar fashion

to the discourse between James and Madame Diouf, another student attempted to describe how sedimentary rocks are formed. This student also spoke in sentence fragments and Madame Diouf provided even more elaboration on his answers than she had for James. As Madame Diouf asked how the small pieces of rock become one, a student eventually told her that “la terre met la pressure dessous[sic]”. This response demonstrates three unusual traits. Firstly, the student uses an English word in the French sentence. This borrowing or code-switching is quite common in the speech of the students as Haj-Broussard (2003) also noted. The code-switching of the immersion students could likely provide ample data for further linguistic analysis. Secondly, it is interesting that this student uses the correct gender in the article which precedes the word “pressure” that would be necessary if he had used the proper French word in this context. Lastly, the student’s production of the word “dessous” [dəsu] in a context where “dessus” [dəsy] is clearly intended indicates that the student may lack awareness of the /y/ phoneme in French or may lack the ability to produce the [y] sound.

Madame Diouf then goes on to review the formation of sedimentary rocks in French as the students provide primarily one-word answers to her questions. One student then identified the word *métamorphose* in *métamorphique* while another defined metamorphosis in French as a change or transformation. The students seem quite capable of identifying root words in French words which suggest a reasonably high level of linguistic competency.

While defining metamorphic rocks, one female student appears to fail to produce the standard French vowel. This particular student appears to pronounce the French word for heat as [ʃaləɪ] rather than [ʃalœχ]. The quality of the recording makes it difficult to judge the vowels produced by the students in most utterances, but problems producing the /χ/ and /œ/ variants are

very common among Americans learning French. The nature of these variations will be addressed in more detail later.

Once the students have completed their review of the different types of rocks, Madame Diouf instructs them to retrieve the “*petits jeux*” (little games) that they were using the day before. The games are actually small cards with the names of different types of rock written in several spaces on the card. The students also have a collection of various rocks to go with the cards. The students are instructed to find two examples of each variety of rock within the rock samples provided. As the students try to clear their desks for the rock activity and retrieve their supplies, Madame Diouf collects any progress reports which have not yet been given to her.

I observed the students as they tried to find the appropriate rocks for their cards. During this activity, the students spoke quietly amongst themselves. My recorder could not pick up the conversations of the students, but I did make notes in my journal. I observed some female students speaking with one another in a mix of French and English as they tried to complete the activity. However, the majority of students that I could hear were speaking to one another in English. During the activity, any student who spoke with Madame Diouf spoke exclusively in French. After several minutes the students finish choosing rocks which represent the different varieties. Madame Diouf then asks the students to share which rocks they chose to represent the different varieties. The students share their choices in French and explain why they chose certain rocks when asked. The students spend the remainder of the class sharing their observations of the rocks and how they concluded which varieties of rock they had. This discussion illustrated no further linguistic traits which had not already been noted.

The science class ended after this discussion. One student asked if I would be accompanying them to their next class, so I had apparently not gone unnoticed. Madame Diouf approached me after class and I elaborated on what exactly I had come to observe. I stopped my recording and thanked her for allowing me to observe. She informed me that the eighth grade students would now be going to French class which was at the end of the hall.

### **French Class**

I walked down the hall to the French language arts classroom where all of the students I had just observed were headed. I entered the room and introduced myself to Madame Henry. I could tell by her accent that she was from France and she was middle-aged. I would learn later that she was from France and had come to Louisiana seven years earlier to teach in the immersion program and had been there ever since. I chose a seat in the very back of the room. I sat down and began taking notes and recording as the students entered the classroom. Her classroom walls were adorned with many posters and decorations in French.

The recording of Madame Henry's class begins with the sounds of students shuffling through the classroom to reach their desks. Several students are speaking and arguing in English. One student ran into the room which provoked a verbal reprimand in French from Madame Henry. When the bell rang to signal the beginning of the class period, Madame Henry greeted the class by saying "Bonjour à tous." Some of the students respond in unison "Bonjour Madame." Madame Henry begins class by reminding the students that they only have two days remaining to finish a project involving newspaper articles. She then informs them that she is going to give them a brief exercise to do before they begin the day's lesson.

Madame Henry reminds the students of a grammar lesson they had completed earlier in the week regarding expressions with the verb *avoir* (to have). The students each take out a sheet of paper with various expressions with *avoir* printed on them. Madame Henry reviews several expressions very briefly such as *avoir peur* (to be afraid) or *avoir soif* (to be thirsty), and reminds the students how these constructions differ from their English counterparts in their use of the auxiliary *avoir*. The students are then asked to write several sentences in their notebooks that utilize these *avoir* expressions in the futur proche (near-future) tense. Madame Henry calls the names on her class roll while the students complete this assignment.

Many of the students conduct whispered conversations while Madame Henry calls the roll. Madame Henry stops calling the roll a few times in order to ask the students to stop talking and complete their assignment. She calls a few students to come speak with her at her desk after the roll, and many students continue to whisper to one another rather than work on their assignment. After a few minutes, Madame Henry asks for a volunteer to give the class an example sentence. She also reminds the students that they will be having a test on these types of expressions before the Thanksgiving holiday so they should pay attention. The students' example sentences which were written on the board are listed below:

*Ils vont avoir peur.* (They will be afraid)

*Nous allons avoir peur.* (We are going to be afraid)

*Tu vas avoir chaud.* (You are going to be hot)

These example sentences appear to be rather elementary, and I was somewhat surprised that eighth graders who had been ostensibly speaking French every day at school since kindergarten

would need to be tested on this material. However, the review of this material was very brief and clearly intended as a sort of warm-up activity.

Madame Henry then told the students they would be studying more poetry that day. She asked the students if any of them could remember what they had discussed about poetry the day before. The students volunteered that they had defined metaphor the day before and discussed different forms of poetry. Up to this point, Madame Henry has spoken exclusively in French to the students, and they have spoken exclusively in French to her. Yet the whispered conversations between students appeared to be in English.

The students all have photocopies from a French textbook which they are using to study poetry. One student is asked to read aloud the poem by Henri Pichette which they all have printed on the photocopies before them. A male student volunteer has no difficulty reading Pichette's eight line poem "La Lune." Madame Henry then explains that this poem will serve as a model for poems which the students are about to write, but she wishes to analyze the poem and define one or two problematic words in the text first. She asks the students if there are any words in the poem that they don't understand. One student named William raises his hand and asks "*On fait La Lune?*" (We're doing The Moon?). To this rather strange question, Madame Henry responds that they have quit talking about grammar and they have moved on to poetry, and that they are now looking for words they don't understand in the poem. William apparently had either quit paying attention or has difficulty understanding what happens in class. Based on my observation his behavior in all of the immersion classes that day, I surmise that William has problems expressing himself in French and understanding it.

Eventually, another student raises his hand and states that he does not know the word *hublot* which was in the poem. Madame Henry is pleased with the question and defines the word as a small round window on the side of a boat. She writes this definition on the board and asks the students to copy it. Another student volunteers that she does not understand the phrase *une perle dans les flots*. Immediately several other students look at her and say in English “a pearl.” The girl then looks at Madame Henry for confirmation. Madame Henry nods in affirmation and repeats in French “*une perle.*”

She then writes the word *flot* on the board and asks if anyone can tell her a verb which is related to that word. She tells the students that she wishes to define the word based on its root, and asks again for a verb whose root is *flot*. One student raises his hand and says *flotter*. Madame Henry writes this on the board and asks the students what *flotter* means. Another student raises his hand and says in French that *flotter* is when “something is in the water.” Madame Henry asks him in French, “and does it sink or not sink?” The student says that it does not sink. Madame Henry then says that the students now see what *flotter* means, therefore she asks what *flots* means. Another student raises his hand and says “*les vagues d’eau*” (the waves of water). Madame Henry repeats the word “waves” and says that is very good because *flot* is essentially the “rhythm of the waves.” She then congratulates the students on having found the definition without a dictionary. This technique of making the students define words based on root words is similar to that seen in Madame Diouf’s class with the names of rocks.

Madame Henry then reviews the lesson from the previous day about poetry. She discusses how metaphors are images in poetry, and the students identify the metaphors in Pichette’s poem such as the *hublot* and the *perle dans les flots*. She asks the students to reflect on all of the images in the poem and find the common theme. The students find the common

theme of round objects, and Madame Henry points out how Pichette uses the technique of comparison to describe the moon. She also helps the students find where Pichette uses alliteration to accentuate his comparative images.

Madame Henry then informs the class that they are going to be writing a poem of their own. They are instructed to write this poem using the method of comparison, based on the model of “La Lune”, about a topic of their choosing. The students seem initially confused and many raise their hands with questions, so Madame Henry writes specific instructions on the board in French. The instructions were:

1. Choose a theme (subject)
2. Find its comparative elements that can be compared to other things
3. Write your poem on the model of “La Lune”

Madame Henry clarifies that the poem is meant to be on the model of “La Lune,” not about the moon itself. One student asks after this clarification if they are allowed to use the moon, but Madame Henry asks them to find another theme. As Madame Henry arrives at her desk, William raises his hand and asks if he needs to copy the instructions from the board. When she says that he does, William says “Ah Man!” in English. Madame Henry then mockingly imitates William and says “Ah Man! *Ça, c’est du travail!*” (Ah Man! That’s work!). This use of the English expletive “Ah Man!” could provide a topic for further research and will be discussed in more detail later.

A few moments later William asks what the instructions mean and Madame Henry says “*Choisissez un thème*” (Choose a theme) to which William replies in English “A theme?” Madame Henry repeats “*Oui, un thème!*” She then returns to the front of the class with an example of a poem that the students can use. She reads the poem written by a former student on the theme of the sun and describes the process by which the poem was written step by step. The

students volunteer several traits of the sun that could be compared to other objects and then give other objects which share these traits. These explanations take several minutes then Madame Henry asks the students to come get her approval to continue once they have chosen a theme.

At this point, Madame Henry approaches me to describe the way they study Language Arts at Paul Breaux. It was during this conversation that she said she was from France and had been involved with the immersion programs for seven years. When asked about the students' "French accents" she told me that she believes their accents are "excellent." She described how, in the past, problems with teachers entering and leaving the program had led to an instability which hindered the children's development in French, but she believed that situation was changing now.

While we were talking William raised his hand and asked a question, the conversation proceeded as follows<sup>2</sup>:

Mme Henry: Oui Monsieur William. J'ai vu ta main.

William : Uh...On fait le poème ?

Mme Henry: Oui William, maintenant vous allez écrire votre poème. Mais avant vous devez choisir votre thème.

William: On fait le poème sur un chose dans le *solar system*? [sic]

Mme Henry: Pas forcément. J'ai dit que tu choisiss un thème comme tu veux...J'ai voulu donner...

Student : *Anything ! Anything !*

Mme Henry : ...l'exemple du soleil. Oui, mais il faut bien que tu penses au éléments de comparaisons que tu vas choisir avant ton thème.

William : Comme...Comme...

Mme Henry: Comme le soleil !

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<sup>2</sup> For a translation see Appendix

William : Comme un *theme* dans le *solar system*?...Comme *Ju...Jupiter, Uranus or some* chose comme ça ?

Mme Henry : T'es pas obligé de choisir ça ! Tu peux prendre autre chose. Tu peux prendre un champ par exemple.

William : Oh !

Mme Henry : Tu peux prendre...Tu peux prendre, j'sais pas moi...une fleur...une rose...tu peux prendre n'importe quoi. Ton poème, c'est sur n'importe quoi. Ce qu'il faut, c'est incorporer des éléments de comparaisons.

Student : Je peux utiliser le soleil ?

Mme Henry : Oui, tu peux utiliser le soleil.

The conversation clearly illustrates some communicative deficiencies on the part of William. At the end of this discussion it was still not apparent that William understood the assignment. I noted several other students attempting to explain the assignment in English to William. However, William was not the only student who required further explanation. I noted several students discussing the instructions in English. Code-switching was also common in the conversations of many students at this point. One student stated, "Je vais faire un rainbow" (I'm going to do a rainbow). Most of the students also seemed to be using French-English dictionaries during this class. I would not have anticipated the need for the widespread use of dictionaries in an immersion class at this level prior to my observations.

At this point, the students worked to find and record a theme and some elements for comparison. Each student then approached the desk of Madame Henry to seek approval of his topic. After approving the ideas of some of the students, Madame Henry explained to me that these poems would be part of a poetry book that each student was making. Over the course of the semester, the students had been writing different types of poems on various topics which

were being compiled into a book for each student. She showed me an example of the Halloween poems that the students wrote in order to learn new vocabulary related to Halloween. With her permission, I moved next to her desk so I could observe her interactions with the students. The students came to her one by one and to receive approval of their topics and guidance on which elements to use for comparison. Their interactions were all in French, but unfortunately the volume of their conversations was too low to register on my recording. After their discussions with Madame Henry, the students returned to their desk to write their poems in their poetry books.

The students worked at their desks during this time with varying degrees of discipline. Many students had conversations with one another in English which were not related to class. The more conscientious students would use French or a mixture of French and English to discuss their poems while they worked. Madame Henry interrupted her conversations with individual students several times in order to reprimand the class for their volume and to tell them to finish their work. When William showed his poem to Madame Henry, she tried to show him that he had not followed the model. He did not seem to understand the instructions, and he was angry when Madame Henry sent him back to his desk to rewrite his poem. The class continued in this manner until the bell rang and the Madame Henry said goodbye to the students as they immediately began filing out of the class.

Without speaking with any students directly, I made a few phonetic and phonological observations about their speech during Madame Henry's class. I noted that most students tried to use the [ʁ] and [χ] uvular fricatives for the /r/ phoneme while some simply retained an American [ɹ] sound in French. I also recorded that, though there were exceptions, the vast majority of students used English diphthongs such as [oʊ] and [iə] instead of the more typical French

monophthongs. I noticed extremely widespread, if not categorical, usage of aspirated voiceless stops when the students spoke French. However, I did note that the majority of students did produce both of the French phonemes /u/ and /y/ which is very often not the case among American English speakers who speak French. A systematic phonological study of the immersion students would most likely provide some interesting data for further study.

After class, Madame Henry gave me a copy of the poem the students had worked on during class. I thanked her for allowing me to observe and asked if she could direct me to the students' social studies class. The class was on the lower floor of the building.

### **Social Studies**

Madame Henry accompanied me downstairs and introduced me to the social studies teacher. Her name was Madame Vermaelen and she was from Belgium. She was in her late twenties or early thirties and quite energetic. I explained that I was a graduate student doing a linguistic study and she was quite happy to allow me to observe and record her class. Madame Vermaelen's classroom had a large Belgian flag hanging on the wall and several pictures of various Belgian sites in the corner. The room was essentially like the other classrooms I had visited that day, but the air conditioner was a large and very ancient piece of equipment. Unfortunately the noise from this air conditioner rendered much of my recording from Madame Vermaelen's class unusable.

After the bell rang to begin class, Madame Vermaelen began with a geography lesson. She showed the students Tierra del Fuego on a map and asked them to try and guess why it was given that name. The students were very quiet and attentive during this lesson. She told them that the explorer Magellan had named this island as a hint. The students offered many guesses

and were eventually led to the conclusion that Magellan had seen the fires which the natives used to keep warm in the cold climate. After this brief warm-up exercise, the students began their lesson for the day.

Madame Vermaelen asked the students what important word they had learned the day before about American government. One student volunteered the answer *le fédéralisme*. Through asking the students specific questions, she allowed several students to state what they had learned about the governmental system of the United States and why it was established in the way it was. Madame Vermaelen then explained that on this day they were going to compare the system of government of the United States with that of the state of Louisiana. She gave the students each two sheets of paper. One sheet explained the basic nature of the government of Louisiana in French, and the second sheet contained questions about the state government whose answers could be found on the first. Madame Vermaelen told the students that they could work in pairs to complete the work sheets as long as they spoke only in French. She told them that if she heard them speaking in English they would have to work by themselves.

The students began their assignment in pairs, and they were quite obedient to the instructions to speak French with one another. Madame Vermaelen walked around the room to see if the students were able to get started without any problems. She then apologized that she would have to turn on the air conditioner because the noise completely overwhelmed my recording device. The next several minutes of my recording are mostly unintelligible. I did record in my notes that the students would speak in French if they believed Madame Vermaelen could hear them, but they would revert to English as soon as they believed she could not. Madame Vermaelen informed me that she had them work in pairs so I could listen to their French, but she admitted that they would always revert to English among themselves unless they

were constantly supervised. This observation is consistent with the reported findings of Caldas and Caron-Caldas during their case study (1997, 1999, 2000, 2002, 2007) as well as Tarone and Swain (1995).

Regarding the students' French, I made two interesting observations which had been present throughout the day. Firstly, I recorded that the students were prone to errors in grammatical gender agreement. I made a note of this phenomenon earlier in the day, but the conversations between the students as well as those during the French language arts class revealed that these gender errors are extremely common and occur in various syntactic categories. Further study would be required to find the cause of these widespread syntactic errors. Secondly, I recorded that they use the informal second person pronoun *Tu* when speaking with their professors. This lack of formality with professors would be quite strange for many if not most francophone communities, but appears to be the norm in the immersion schools. I asked Madame Vermaelen about this phenomenon after class, and she told me that she was shocked by this behavior when she first arrived in Louisiana. She speculated that this behavior began in the immersion kindergarten programs and simply became the norm for the students.

While the students were working, Madame Vermaelen asked about my research. She offered to allow me to use the last few minutes of class to ask the students any questions I would like. I was very grateful for the opportunity to be able to ask the students themselves how they felt about their own abilities in French as well as the varieties of French that they encounter. Although I could not record exact numbers of students who responded positively or negatively to questions, the students tended to agree on their answers to most of the questions.

Because the theoretical purpose of the French immersion programs is to maintain and promote the French heritage of Louisiana, I first asked the students how many of them had parents or grandparents who spoke Cajun French. I did not ask questions about Creole French because the term can be rather nebulous and the demographics of the students were such that most were more likely to have Cajun French speakers in their families. The majority of students responded that they have Cajun French-speaking family members. I then asked the students if they have trouble understanding their Cajun-speaking relatives. Approximately one third of the class responded yes, and approximately one third of the class responded no. Because many students did not respond, I asked if they sometimes have trouble understanding Cajun French and a majority of students responded positively.

I asked the students why they had trouble understanding Cajun French. Several students responded that they speak too quickly. I asked if their teachers did not speak too quickly, and one student said that they do sometimes but he can ask them to repeat themselves. Another student stated that the Cajun French speakers mix French and English and they use some words which are French but not words they have studied in school. One student spoke of a teacher that they had at Prairie elementary who was apparently Cajun, and the students thought he spoke too fast for them.

To get a basis for comparison, I asked the students if they have had teachers from the region of Paris, which is thought by many to be a region where people speak very rapidly. Several students said they had one teacher from Paris, but she only spoke too quickly when she was angry. When asked if they thought their teachers from Quebec spoke too quickly, one student said yes but most disagreed. All of the students agreed that teachers they had met from

Belgium and Switzerland did not speak too quickly. However, they almost all agreed that their teachers from Africa spoke French too quickly.

I asked the students if they had noticed that these teachers from different regions all used slightly different vocabularies and accents, and they all claimed to have observed this. But then they all claimed that this did not hinder them from understanding their different varieties of French. So I returned to my earlier question and asked if they had a harder time understanding Cajun French than any of these other varieties. Almost every student responded affirmatively. Madame Vermaelen appeared surprised by the response and repeated my question to the students. They all responded again that Cajun French was harder for them to understand than any other variety.

The student James, mentioned earlier, asked Madame Vermaelen where she was from. Madame Vermaelen looked surprised and sarcastically told him to look at the wall while pointing at the Belgian flag. James said that he believed Madame Vermaelen spoke very fast. She then asked them how many of them speak French with their families, and the majority raised their hands. When I asked them where they encounter French outside the classroom, they only responded that they speak French with family members. One student did claim to have met a man from Quebec at the library.

I asked the students if they ever listen to French radio programs or watch French television. They almost all responded negatively. I asked if that was because the French programs were not interesting. The following interaction resulted from my question:<sup>3</sup>

Student: Les personnes sur la télévision ils parlent très très très très vites. Et on n'est pas très...um...used to...um

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<sup>3</sup> For an English translation see Appendix

Myself : Habitué ?

Student : Oui, habitué de entendre[sic] ça.

Mme Vermaelen : Mais vous savez, je parle avec vous comme je parle avec mes amis Belges or mes amis Français

Student : Oui mais tu parles vite.

This interaction concluded my interview with the students. The students then proceeded to ask me several questions. The very first question one student asked was “Où est-ce que tu viens de [sic]?” which most likely illustrates that this student has integrated the English syntax of prepositions into her French. This type of grammatical irregularity is quite common among Americans learning French.

The students asked me several more questions about myself. They wanted to know such things as how I learned French, what language I spoke the most, and if I attended LSU football games. After the questions, the class period was nearly over. Mme. Vermaelen allowed the students to spend the remaining few minutes of class playing a classroom game called “tête en bas” often called “Seven Up” in English. However, the students were told that they could only play this game if they spoke only in French. The students protested the idea of speaking French during the game, but they eventually conceded in order to play the game.

Mme. Vermaelen told me while the children were playing their game that she found it incredible that they can understand so many different dialects of French, but claim to have trouble understanding Cajun French which is native to the area. She did say that she knew one student could speak a truly Cajun variety of French and he did speak it at home but this student would only speak a more standard variety at school. Just before the bell rang to end the class

period, Madame Vermaelen reprimanded the students because they had begun speaking English. She told me that they always slip into English when speaking with one another. After class she told me that she believed it was only natural that they would speak English with each other because they spend the vast majority of their day, even at school, hearing English.

Madame Vermaelen was extremely helpful and offered to assist me in any way possible if I needed to conduct further research. She informed me that this was her second year teaching in the immersion school, and she seemed to have a good rapport with the students. I later learned that Madame Vermaelen returned to Belgium at the end of the school year. I left the school after the Social Studies class because the students had finished their immersion classes for the day.

## Chapter 5

### Interpreting the Observations

#### Interpreting Student/Teacher Interactions

The linguistic behavior of the teachers in this immersion program was essentially what I expected. Based on my research, I thought it unlikely that any of the teachers would be natives of Louisiana or the United States. This was indeed the case for all of the teachers, and their production of French reflected their various countries of origin. During my observation, the teachers always spoke in French even if the students spoke in English. When the students made grammatical errors, the teachers usually repeated the students' speech using the correct grammar. Common student errors such as the usage of the incorrect grammatical gender tended to be the same types of errors common among all American students learning French. The grammatical irregularities recorded were also not representative of Louisiana varieties of French. Therefore, further study on the types of grammatical errors made by immersion students in Acadiana would probably provide little new information.

Regarding types of teacher materials, I observed different types of material in each class. In Madame Diouf's science class, the students used English science text books and discussed them in French. In Madame Henry's French class, the students used mass-produced French language textbooks. In Madame Vermaelen's Social Studies class, the students used what appeared to be materials designed specifically for usage in Louisiana immersion schools. Further comparative studies into the types of materials used in immersion classrooms as well as the effects those materials have on students' abilities in French could provide useful insights about how best to educate students in Louisiana immersion schools.

Importantly, the students almost invariably use French to speak to their teachers. This is no doubt through habit as well as direction. The linguistic environment of immersion classrooms is thus a situation of diglossia. The prestige or superordinate language used with authority figures in the immersion classrooms is obviously French. The subordinate English language is confined to informal peer interaction and some written material. Given the history of French in Louisiana schools, this situation appears quite ironic. However, it must be balanced by the fact that these students spend the majority of their day in other classrooms where English is the language used for every function. I took note of the fact that the students who addressed me always did so in French.

### **Interpreting Student Language Attitudes**

While at least two studies on language attitudes have been conducted in the Louisiana immersions schools, none have ever been conducted among the students themselves. Previous studies by Tornquist (2000) and Barnett (2010) focused on the parents and teachers of immersion students, but the students themselves have been conspicuously neglected in this research. Though not systematic or thorough, my brief interview with the students in Madame Vermaelen's class provides some interesting insights.

Whether or not this is true, Cajun French appears to be perceived by many or possibly most students as quite different from other varieties. Surprisingly, many students believe Cajun French is more difficult to understand than other varieties of French. They perceive Cajun French speakers to speak too rapidly, yet they claim to have no problems understanding speakers of other varieties of French. They even claimed that African Francophones speak very fast, but that they have no trouble understanding them. The students also mentioned the slightly different

Cajun vocabulary, but admitted that their teachers who come from around the world have different vocabularies that do not pose any problem for them. It should be noted that although the three teachers I met all spoke with different accents, they all spoke what I would characterize as a “standardized” form of French which reflected their formal education in the “standard” variety of French. One student said that Cajun speakers are hard to understand because they mix French and English, but this explanation seems strange given that these students speak both of those languages and commonly mix the two themselves.

I suspect that there are several possible causes for this perception that Cajun French is more difficult to understand than other varieties. Language attrition among Cajun French speakers is a noted phenomenon in Louisiana, and it is possible that this phenomenon is causing the problems of comprehension for these students. For example, if a student were to hear a grandparent who has relatively low linguistic competence in French use some grammatical structure incorrectly, the student may assume that he has simply misunderstood the grandparent rather than recognizing this as an error. It is also possible that the French used by these Cajun speakers is more informal in nature and deals with subjects never discussed in a classroom setting. The fact that the students’ French vocabulary often seems to be limited to academic realms may mean they lack the necessary vocabulary and syntactical structures necessary to understand highly informal speech. Finding an explanation for the attitude of these students toward Cajun French, and possibly other Louisiana varieties, would provide an excellent subject for further study within these immersion schools.

The students’ attitude toward speaking French among themselves demands further study. Though my questions did not address this area, my observation that the students rarely speak French to one another suggests that there is some social phenomenon at work. The case study by

Caldas and Caron-Caldas found that immersion students consciously choose English over French for communicating with their peers (1999). Their son stated in a language survey that “If you speak French outside of school, your friends will think you’re a nerd...If everyone speaks English, why would anyone want to speak French?” (p. 47). Their daughter, another immersion student, stated that students don’t speak French unless they’re forced because “it’s not cool” (p. 47). These findings mirror those of Heller in a French immersion school in Toronto (as cited in Caldas 1999). Tornquist observed that at a picnic organized by CODOFIL to unite all the French immersion programs the students did not speak any French with one another or with their families, and the teachers were the only attendees speaking French (2000, p. 117).

Tarone and Swain point out that “older [immersion] students need a vernacular for peer-peer social functions that are essential to their social context” (1995, p. 169). The immersion students’ reticence to speak French among their peers may stem from the same cause as their difficulty understanding Cajun French. Along the lines of Tarone and Swain’s hypothesis, if the students lack the necessary vocabulary to speak informally and perform the functions of adolescent speech such as mock one another and be sarcastic, then it is only logical they will use English in these contexts (1995). Haj-Broussard noted that Louisiana immersion students are not opposed to learning social vocabulary in French (2003). She states that some students even asked her how to say things like “shut up” and “you crazy” in French (p. 365). She also noted one teacher who gave a list of common fourth grade social phrases such as “you’re bothering me” to her immersion students, and did observe the students using some French for social interaction (p. 296). However, the social pressures associated with language usage probably extend beyond a lack of ability. Caldas concluded that “the children’s desire to conform the linguistic standards of their peers extended beyond the actual presence of their peers, as the

children stopped speaking French around the Louisiana dinner table even when consistently spoken to in French by their parents” (2007, p. 307). A systematic study of student language attitudes could provide insight into effective techniques to encourage student social interaction in French.

Additionally, the students’ apparent lack of interest in French media outside the classroom is also fascinating. A further study into student language attitudes and behaviors outside the classroom could benefit the immersion programs. Integration of more relevant mainstream Francophone media into the classroom could provide students with the motivation to seek other opportunities to hear and use French outside the school. Furthermore, observing the linguistic behavior of their francophone peers through media may provide the students with the vocabulary necessary to use French in more informal peer situations.

### **Interpreting Student Language Production**

Since Louisiana’s immersion programs began, there has been controversy over the variety of French being taught in Acadiana’s schools. However, the even more fundamental question of how well Acadiana’s immersion students are learning French at all remains largely unstudied. Olson Beal describes Hector Hammerly’s immersion research this way:

Hammerly (1987) argues that although immersion programs have been culturally and politically successful, they fail linguistically, resulting in students whose target language proficiency is poor and underdeveloped. Hammerly (1987) summarizes six research studies demonstrating that the target language linguistic competence of immersion students was rife with grammatical and syntactic errors and characterized by short repetitive utterances (2008, p.45).

Though I would hesitate to use the phrase “rife with errors,” my observations as well as my recordings demonstrate that grammatical and syntactic errors are common in the speech of the students at Paul Breaux. Also, as Haj-Broussard observed, the students often use short or incomplete sentences relying on the teachers to complete their sentences for them (2003).

My observations lead me to believe that the students in Paul Breaux’s immersion program could be reasonably described as bilingual. However, I would not characterize them as balanced bilinguals. Their propensity to commit errors in basic grammar and syntax, coupled with an apparent lack of some basic vocabulary seem to indicate that they are very English-dominant. A case study at the immersion program at South Boulevard elementary in East Baton Rouge parish found that “students make numerous grammatical and syntax errors in speech- particularly when they branch out to conversation topics outside the school setting- yet these mistakes do not impede communication (Olson Beal, 2008, p. 46).” The same study notes that there is no official test to measure the language skills of the immersion students at South Boulevard. Some Acadiana immersion students take a test called the SOPA (Student oral proficiency assessment) and little other testing is done (Haj-Broussard email). While the state of Louisiana insists upon numerous standardized tests for all students in various subjects, there is no standardized test for the linguistic abilities of immersion students in their second language. The anecdotal accounts of the students’ French production suggest that systematic studies of their language skills are urgently needed.

Regarding the variety of French which the students are learning, my phonetic observations are intriguing. I observed the students to produce either the [ɹ] or [ʁ]/[χ] variants of the /r/ phoneme when speaking French. I took note of this contrast with the [r] or [ʀ] variants commonly found in Louisiana varieties of French as well as the African variety spoken by

Madame Diouf. The [ɪ] variant is clearly a remnant of their American-English accent, as it is not found in other varieties of French, and the other variants appear to illustrate the students' attempt to adopt the "Standard" French pronunciation of the /ɪ/ phoneme. Several other sounds produced by the students also suggest the usage of American-English variants when speaking French.

There seemed to be even idiolectal variation among the students in terms of vowel production. Students would often use American diphthongs when speaking French, then the same students would later use that same vowel's monophthong counterpart. Similarly, I observed that some students produced the same sound for both the /u/ and /y/ phonemes in French, but I noted they all seemed to be aware of the phonemic difference between the two. However, without a more systematic study it is difficult to draw any conclusion about the students' vowel production based on my brief observations.

Yet the most interesting observation I made regarding the variety of French spoken by the immersion students involved their production of voiceless stops. I observed many if not most of the students to aspirate their voiceless stops. This trait is clearly one the students have retained from English, as it does not exist in common varieties of French. More importantly, Louisiana varieties of French traditionally lack aspiration of voiceless stops. Dubois and Horvath found that even when speaking English, people of Cajun descent often lack aspiration of voiceless stops (2002). The pervasive presence of this aspiration could serve to characterize the French of Acadiana's immersion schools as neither Standard French nor a traditional Louisiana variety. Tornquist speaks of the variety of French spoken by immersions students this way:

At present, the usage of an international grammar with a slightly Louisianan vocabulary and pronunciation suffices for this form to be called Cajun French. Nevertheless, these

representations need to be verified by empirical studies compared with Louisianans  
(2000, p. 125)

Regarding the usage of Cajun French vocabulary, I did not observe any in conversation but the students did name a couple of Cajun terms during their discussion of how difficult it is to understand Cajun French speakers. Based on all of my observations, it seems more accurate to describe the variety of French spoken by these immersion students as a unique variety which incorporates some aspects of American-English and abandons others in favor of the Standard French variants.

The common use of code-switching by immersion students in their immersion classrooms is another topic for possible future study. A study in code-switching would be complicated by the difficulty of observing this phenomenon without influencing behavior of the students. This type of study would be further complicated by the difficulty of determining if utterances represent examples of code-switching or borrowing. While borrowing is bound to occur in a context such as the immersion school, the regularity of borrowing, as well as the fact that common terms such as prepositions or nouns like “pencil” and “under” have been inserted into French sentences suggests that a more complex code-switching system is at work. For example, the student William’s use of the phrase “dans le solar system” illustrates a level of syntactic integration which suggests a relatively complex system of code-switching. Nevertheless, the practical difficulties of working with students while they attend a class would make further research on this topic very difficult at Paul Breaux.

The usage of the English expletive “Ah! Man!” by a student and teacher during a conversation also reflects one more interesting linguistic phenomenon related to code-switching

or borrowing. As mentioned previously, Haj-Broussard observed that elementary immersion students in Acadiana used French terms for social interaction when they were given a list of appropriate terms (2003). If this use of the English expletive is an occurrence of borrowing it may be further evidence that these students lack the appropriate terms for their social interactions within the classroom. Though it seems only logical that the students are not being taught French expletives, this phenomenon may shed light on why they chose not to speak French among each other. Further studies into immersion student speech among peers could also investigate the phenomenon of expletives.

## **Chapter 6**

### **Conclusions**

My study has revealed several linguistic topics which could benefit from further study in the French immersion schools of Acadiana. The observations and recordings I have made confirm much anecdotal evidence regarding the socio-linguistic behavior of the students. Their reluctance to speak French with their peers, their reliance on teachers to clarify their own speech, and their extensive code-switching are all topics which have been mentioned previously in the literature about immersion schools. Yet there is still no corpus of systematically gathered data, with from which to draw conclusions about these phenomena. Paul Breaux and other immersion schools in Acadiana provide an excellent resource to study these issues in the future.

This study provides evidence that the immersion students of Acadiana have some unexpected language attitudes. A more systematic study of these attitudes is certainly needed. Because these immersion students represent the future generations of Francophones in Louisiana, their language attitudes will shape the future of French in Louisiana. Without further studies regarding the language attitudes of the students, it is impossible to know how effective the immersion programs have been in raising the students' awareness of Louisiana's French heritage and other cultures which is a stated purpose of the immersion program. Research into language attitudes would most likely also result in better ideas of how immersion students can be motivated to become better French speakers.

In addition to studying the linguistic attitudes of students, there is a desperate need for research into the linguistic abilities of the immersion students in Acadiana. Large sums of money are spent each year in these immersion programs to ensure that these students learn French. Yet there appears to be very little effort applied to evaluating the results of these

programs. Researchers and educators need to work together in the future in order to find ways to measure and compare the effectiveness of immersion programs in Louisiana. Further research along these lines would provide invaluable information about how to improve the education of these students, and it may inspire more widespread measures to maintain and increase the quality of immersion education in Louisiana.

Additional phonological and phonetic research among Acadiana's immersion students is also necessary. Empirical evidence from the immersion students themselves, could answer many fundamental questions that have surrounded these programs for years. Debates about what varieties of French are being taught in immersion schools could be much better informed by systematic research. Questions about the future of Louisiana varieties of French could also be answered by studying the variety of French spoken by the state's younger speakers.

I believe the research conducted at Paul Breaux has been very beneficial. Several areas for future study have been identified. With the cooperation of Louisiana's public schools, researchers can hope to expand upon the information discovered at Paul Breaux Middle School. While linguists have conducted innumerable studies in immersion schools around the world, those schools in Louisiana have gone largely unstudied. The unique linguistic context of Louisiana could be key to revealing important information in several domains of linguistic study. In the future, I hope that I can study these phenomena in more detail and create a fuller picture of the variety of French spoken in Louisiana's immersion schools. I believe that by better understanding the French of immersion students in Acadiana, these programs can be improved and expanded in ways that will help ensure Louisiana's place in the Francophone world for generations to come.

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## Appendix: Translation of Dialogues

### Dialogue 1

- M. Diouf : This is the first time in a long time that we've been ready for a quiz ...metemorphic. Someone tell me how an igneous rock forms.
- James : In the volcano
- M. Diouf : It forms in the volcano ?
- James : ...mubling
- M. Diouf : Yes...I didn't hear. James, I think you can speak louder.
- James : It forms after a volcano erupts [*incorrect verb form*]
- M. Diouf : Yes
- James : It goes on the ground
- M. Diouf : What goes on the ground ?
- James : the lava [*uses masculine article*]
- M. Diouf : The lava [*uses correct feminine article*]...Ok
- James : ...(whispers to himself) the lava [*using correct article*]
- M. Diouf : Ok the lava goes on the ground and then what...what happens to the lava?
- James : to cool and... [*fails to conjugate verb*]
- M. Diouf : It cools, and then after it cools what does it do?...it becomes...
- James : a rock ?
- M. Diouf : It becomes...
- James : solid ?
- M. Diouf : It becomes solid. It becomes hard and then the next day it becomes a rock, one day after it becomes a rock ?
- James : This takes... [*somewhat odd pronoun usage*]
- M. Diouf : It takes
- James : It takes a thousand years

M. Diouf : It takes many years, it takes thousands and thousands of years before this lava that has hardened becomes a rock

## Dialogue 2

Italics represents code switching

Mme Henry: Yes, Mr. William. I saw your hand.

William : Uh... We're doing the poem ?

Mme Henry: Yes William, now you're going to write your poem. But before you have to choose a theme ?

William: We're doing the poem on something in the *solar system*? [code switching]

Mme Henry: Not necessarily. I said you can choose any theme you want...I wanted to give...

Student : *Anything ! Anything* ![in English]

Mme Henry : ...the example of the sun. Yes, but you really need to think about the comparative elements you're going to choose before you choose a theme

William : Like...Like...

Mme Henry: Like the sun !

William : Like a *theme* in the *solar system*?...Like *Ju...Jupiter, Uranus or some thing* like that ? [code switching]

Mme Henry : You don't have to choose that ! You can take something else. You can take a lamp for example.

William : Oh !

Mme Henry : You can take...You can take, I dunno...a flower...a rose...you can take whatever. Your poem, it's about whatever. All that matters is that you incorporate the comparative elements

Student : I can use the sun ?

Mme Henry : Yes, you can use the sun.

### Dialogue 3

Student: The people on T.V. speak very very very very fast. And we're not very...um...*used to*...um [English borrowing]

Myself : Used to ? [French equivalent given]

Student : Yes, used to to hear[sic] that.

Mme Vermaelen : But you [plural] know, I speak with you [plural] like I speak with my Belgian or French friends

Student : Yes, but you speak fast.

## **Vita**

Albert Sidney Camp IV attended the University of Georgia in Athens, Georgia, and Moody Bible Institute in Chicago, Illinois. He graduated *cum laude* from Moody Bible Institute in 2006 with a Bachelor of Arts in applied linguistics. He has taught French professionally at the elementary, middle school, and collegiate levels. He currently teaches introductory French courses at Louisiana State University where he is pursuing a doctorate in French linguistics.