Cajun Come to Town: On Cajun French, Translation, and Civic Engagement

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In this article, Emily Fontenot explores translingualism through her Cajun heritage and her work as a fiction writer. She explains the decisions she has to make when it comes to language and the importance of those decisions.

"Let me tell you something," I said, getting to the point of one of my many long-winded stories at an Easter barbeque at my cousin's house.

My dad stopped me. He told me I said that too often to not know how to say it in Cajun French. "Les mingans kick-shaw," he told me. I repeated it back to him and typed it into my phone.

I've been doing this all my life. Many a memory is sprinkled with instructions on how to say things in my family's language. Some of these phrases are really easy to pick up because I have my training in Parisian French and some of the words and structures are similar. Like the phrase I learned on an early 2000s Christmas morning. My dad was the one who always made us wait. We weren't allowed to start opening presents until he had taken his morning shower and shaved—at least a half-hour ordeal—and had fixed his cup of coffee. When he was finally out of the bathroom, we sat waiting for him to fix his coffee. He crossed the living room at a casual pace and paused halfway to his chair, taking a luxurious sip of his coffee amongst the chorus of our "DAD!"s. He looked at me, winked, and said, "Mmm, c'est bon café." Always the eager learner, I asked, "Good coffee?" He smiled

and said yes. We did our ritual of parroting the phrase to one another, this time with me getting the dirty looks from my siblings. But the desire to open presents waned ever so slightly as the words sat like sugar on my lips.

I still feel this way when learning new phrases. Unfortunately, I don't know many. I definitely don't have a working vocabulary of Cajun French, and there's no simple way for me to gain one. There's no Rosetta Stone for Cajun French. No Google Translate. I can't even just text my dad for phrases. Cajun French is an oral language; it has "no formal structure, no written tradition and no textbook. It is so improvised, it varies from parish to parish" (Nossiter). "Parish"—an old French word—is our word for "county." Louisiana has no counties, only parishes. My dad has no formal training in Cajun or even Parisian French, so he has no way to know how to spell anything he wants to say in French. Every time I've texted him to ask how to say something, he calls me minutes later saying, "I don't know how to spell it so I have to just say it to you." This is the major problem among the dwindling of Cajun French speakers. As an oral language with no set grammar rules, there's really no way to formalize it, which makes the language incredibly difficult to teach or document. And in many cases, Cajun people are poorly educated; my dad, for instance, is the sixth of seven children and the first to graduate high school. On top of not having the formal structure of the language, few have the training to teach a language, which in itself is an arduous task.

On Language Difference

You may have heard the term **translingualism** floated by your instructor (if not, then get ready!). I find translingualism easiest to understand when broken down. "Trans" means "across," and I like to think of it as a crossing of borders or movement between spaces. "Lingual" means "language." The Writing Program website (isuwriting.com) has resources on translingualism, if you'd like to explore it a bit more. In light of that, I like to think of translingualism as a crossing of borders through language, or even a crossing of language boundaries. The great thing about this term is that everyone is translingual in some way, shape, or form.

Don't believe me? You might be thinking in the binary of monolingual versus multilingual, which is not the same thing as being translingual. Monolingual means you only know one language. Multilingual means you know more than one language. But translingual encompasses more than both of those because, even if you "only" know English, I can guarantee you, you know multiple Englishes. For example, the language you use when

you tweet is probably different from the language you use when you write papers in an English class. That's because you have this awesome skill called **code-switching**. Different life situations require different codes. An easy example of this is the "customer service" voice. Saying cheerily and most likely in a higher pitched voice, "Hello! How are you today?" is a particular intonation of speaking that is meant to make us sound more pleasant and ready to be of service, which is recognizable as a customer service rep or the customer. If you've ever worked in a customer service role, you've probably said goodbye or wished someone a nice day in a very chipper tone, then turned to a coworker to say, "Can this shift just end already?" That's an example of switching codes, which has to do with things like class, agency, positionality, and comfort level. You can also see this happen in the difference between how you talk to your friends versus how you talk to your parents.

On Translation

As I've said earlier, Cajun French is not a typical written language with grammar rules or a working dictionary. (There are people trying to put together dictionaries, but the dictionaries are very sparse and are still being formed. However, the Louisiana State University Department of French Studies does have a Cajun French-English glossary that you can find online.) This makes learning Cajun French difficult for a lot of reasons, but I also want to take some time to talk about the difficulties it presents for translation. For one, there's no dictionary that I can pull from to translate on even a simple, decontextualized language level. I also can't leave you without translation, even if I was following the style of writing that includes untranslated words on purpose, because there's no simple Google search that will give you a basic understanding of the words I'm using—and that's even if I managed to spell it in a way that other Cajuns spelling out the words would agree with. More than that, the words I use and how I use and understand them are distinctly shaped in part by how I came to understand them in relation to my **discourse community**, which is made up by people who said these words around me. Cajun French is incredibly reliant on its discourse community and its shared understandings of words and meanings as well as the grammar that goes along with using them. So, when I translate words and phrases from Cajun French to English in this article, I'll be giving translations the way I learned to do with people outside of my community: I'll be telling stories to explain words and phrases I use.

For example, there's a word we use very frequently in my house that people as close as Baton Rouge, about two hours away, don't know: thra-ka

(I did warn you that I was spelling phonetically, right?) The pronunciation is more important to me than how weird it looks on paper. The way I usually explain what this word means is by saying, "You know when you were a kid and you were at the store with your mom and y'all were checking out and you saw some chips or coke and you asked your mom if you could have some? And she undoubtedly said no? That there was food at home or you're not really hungry, or that's what they put it by the counter for? My mom would have just said, 'No. That's just a thra-ka.' That's what that word means." Granted, I could have said something like "it's a want that you don't need," but I don't feel like that covers it. I also don't feel like that definition helps in understanding to the point that you could take and use it. Besides, if I had another word to describe what thra-ka meant, I wouldn't be using thra-ka. I use it because it's the best word I have for a particular feeling, want, or desire.

Situatedness

There is a time and a place for everything, though, and often my Cajun French does not belong in the time and space of my academic writing. Part of this is because the majority of what I know in Cajun French is pejorative, demeaning, or a straight-up cuss word. So, there's that. However, another big part of it is my audience and the **affect** that I want to draw out. Before I get into what affect is and how it relates to my writing and Cajunness, I want to pause and say that though I do believe that there is a time and a place for everything, I am not saying that denying those rules are bad. Subverting expectations of genres, ideas, and mode are all incredibly affective ways of bringing a topic or problem to the surface. I am just saying that I don't think me using Cajun French in academic writing is doing subversive work; it would mostly be strange and out-of-place, and this all has to do with the affect you're going for in your writing. Affect theory is academic talk for feelings and emotions. In my academic (and some other) writing that I want to have a welcoming affect—or community-based affect—I don't want to use a language that excludes others and is hard to translate for yourself. Instead, I want to write in ways that welcome everyone and situates all readers as part of the conversation.

This is different from what I sometimes strive to bring out in my fiction. I'm currently writing a speculative fiction novel that is set in South Louisiana and Central California. The family that I focus on in Louisiana is Cajun. For that reason alone, it makes sense that I use Cajun language and slang in the novel—at least when I'm writing from that family's perspective, right? But there are deeper reasons for it as well. It has to do with affect and what I'm

going to call situatedness. Have you ever purchased a really cheap product—like a face mask from the Dollar Tree—that had writing and instructions on it, but they were all in another language? Well, if you're like me, you always double-check the instructions just to make sure you're not about to burn your face off or anything. But if those directions are in a language you don't understand, there's a moment of puzzlement. You pause for a second and maybe giggle anxiously. That would be an example of an affective response to the single language—more specifically, a single language that you have no knowledge of. Your discomfort is the intentional or unintentional **affect** of the product.

That discomfort is exactly the affect that writers like me and many others implement in our work. It's not a discomfort to the extreme; it's not meant to encourage readers to put the text down and walk away from it, but it is meant to draw their attention. Because part of what monolingual speakers get comfortable with—especially in the U.S. and especially when your one language is English—is having the language around them be accessible to them. On an average day, you may not notice how much English writing you encounter, but you most likely notice when a language other than English is presented to you. To go back to my face mask: I had to stop and consider how anxious I would feel all the time if the only words written on packages were written in languages I didn't know. That's something that I took for granted until I was presented with a product and instructions that I couldn't understand.

Discomfort situates you, the reader, within the text. I'll give an example from the novel I'm writing: The Louisiana family is the Richards. Now, for those of you not from South Louisiana, you may have read that family name as Richard, like the first name; but where I'm from, if Richard is your last name, it's pronounced like Ree-shard. There's a moment in the text where a woman from California contacts them. The first time she asks whether this was the Richard's house, no one corrects her. But after she asks if Mrs. Richard is there, David, the husband, answers, "Well, it's Ree-shard, but yes." This is a moment of situating. If, like me, you read the name as Ree-shard on the first read-through, then you are situated with the Richards; that is, you are positioned and allied with the South in the text. If, however, you read the family name as Richard until David corrected it, then you are positioned and allied with the West within the text.

On the surface, it seems like this is a way to have people choose teams and antagonize others, but what I think it does in many texts—and what I'm trying to do in my text—is have readers acknowledge that position and situatedness and then evaluate it. For instance, in my novel, I go in and out

of many character's perspectives, both Southern and Western, so every reader gets the chance to be in the mind of the other. However, how you're situated doesn't get to change. What I think this encourages is a shift from the relatability factor. If all you're looking for in a text is what you relate to, then you're missing a whole wealth of experience. I think it's extremely important for readers to experience being situated in a text in a position on the periphery. What this means is that usually, as readers, we see ourselves—or try to—in the main character or whoever's perspective we're reading for. That's great because then we read things that we don't necessarily relate to firsthand but that we can empathize with. But there is something to be said of reading something and knowing that your situatedness in the text is outside of the main story and yet still seeing the value in just experiencing another perspective and position.

On Civic Engagement

Besides situating readers in the text, there's something else really important that writers—including myself—accomplish by featuring Cajun French: we document the existence of this language. Remember how I said that Cajun French is an oral language and therefore really hard to teach? That's a major problem Cajuns have been facing since the 1920s, when Cajun French was banned from use (Nossiter). Children were punished when they used it in school, sometimes so severely that there were children who went to the bathroom on themselves because they did not know how to ask to go the restroom in English and teachers wouldn't allow them to go until they could. This did a couple of things. For one, it reduced the use of the language. Most of these children were native Cajun French speakers though, so they at least still knew the language. However, when those children grew up, they were traumatized and had been taught to fear the consequences of using their native language, so many of them did not teach their children Cajun French. My great-grandparents spoke no English, but my grandfather—whose first language was Cajun French—was forced to learn English in school. When my dad and his siblings were growing up, they learned Cajun French only by listening. Their first language was English. In their house, and many others, Cajun French was only spoken by adults in whispers during gossip or conversations that they didn't want children to overhear.

My dad and his siblings were lucky that it was spoken enough for them to learn it by the time they were adults. But with each generation, the language has been used less. Now, my generation barely knows Cajun French. Most

of my older cousins and my oldest brother know a good bit—they're pretty much fluent—but the younger among us know hardly any.

Because of this historical and generational degradation of the language, Cajun French is considered a quickly dying language—a death that is sped up by the lack of a written component. Oral languages can only last as long as the language is still spoken, and the only way people can learn the language is if there are speakers around to teach it.

This makes me so sad. The Cajun French language is one of the only things Cajuns still have of their heritage after a fraught history. This is why I jump at the chance to learn any phrases my family is willing to offer me. When I still lived at home, I made a deal with my aunt that she could only text me in Cajun French since she's the brave soul who goes for phonetic spelling without a care in the world. I would try to text her often, as long as my dad was around to help me translate. I learned a bit that way.

And I hoard the bits of Cajun French that I know. This is why it's so important for me to use the language in my fiction. If I cannot speak the language fluently and pass it on to others, the least I can do is document its existence in text so there is some record that it—and we—exist. At least if I do that, the language doesn't disappear. We Cajuns don't lose our memory of it.

Works Cited

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Emily Fontenot is, obviously, a Cajun from South Louisiana. She moved way up north to ISU to work on her PhD in Creative Writing. When she's not writing, she's probably playing D&D, watching Netflix, cuddling the most perfect dog in the world, or doing one of her many, many crafts– that is to say, she is often not writing.