

Juggling About Cajun French Morphology

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Cajun French, also known as Louisiana (Regional) French, is a dialect of French spoken in Louisiana today which is perhaps most simply summed up with a single sentence: *Vous-autres était après jongler à la morphologie*. This sentence can be translated as: “You (pl.) were thinking about morphology.” In Standard French, this sentence would most likely be rendered as: *Vous pensiez à la morphologie*.” In the Cajun French version, the verb meaning “to think” is *jongler* (Valdman & Rottet 2010, p. 352) whereas this would mean “to juggle” in Standard French (Corréard & Gundry 1995, p. 330). *Vous* versus *vous-autres* is also a lexical difference as the latter does not exist in Standard French while the former is only rarely used in Cajun French (Papen & Rottet 1997, p. 84). Standard French also relies on inflection—and to some extent context—to indicate the progressive past aspect in this instance: *penser* is the verb for “to think” and changes from /pãse/ in the infinitive (Corréard & Gundry 1995, p. 435) to /pãsje/ in the past imperfect, which can be understood as being progressive depending on context. Cajun French, on the other hand, employs the copula *être* /etr/ (Corréard & Gundry 1995, p. 236) followed by *après*, which is functioning as a progressive marker, followed by the infinitive of the verb (Papen & Rottet 1997, p. 102). Although it cannot be indicated in writing, even differences in phonology would become apparent when these two phrases are spoken, arguably the most recognizable of which would be the alveolar tap /ɾ/ of Cajun French versus the velar trill /R/ of Standard French (Papen & Rottet 1997, p. 76-77).

The roots of Cajun French are not made so obvious by the above sentences. The language is the result of a mixture of various French dialects imported from France and Canada up to about the mid 19th century combined with the influences of local languages and some level of isolation (Dajko 2012). It is important to note that French in Louisiana exists as a spectrum of language varieties with Louisiana Creole functioning as a basilect at one end and Cajun French functioning as an acrolect at the other (Klingler 2005). As such, speakers will sometimes exhibit traits that can be thought of as being

more like Louisiana Creole. This mixture can add further difficulties in the description of the morphology of the language.

Affixation, as with most forms of derivation in Cajun French, is thought to be mostly unproductive based on the small number of productive affixes described in two of the largest morphological descriptions taken in 1931 and then in 1986 (Klingler, Picone, & Valdman 1997, p. 166). Papen & Rottet, in documenting the French spoken in Lafourche and Terrebonne Parishes, help corroborate the lack of productivity with their claim that the suffix *ment* /mɑ̃/ “is no longer productive” (1997, p. 92) while this suffix remains very common in Standard French. Nevertheless, affixation is employed.

Deverbal nouns are created by use of the *eur* /œ/ suffix being applied to the verb conjugation paradigm ending in *er* /e/ (Klingler et al. 1997, p. 166). For instance, *créditer* /kredite/ meaning “to credit” becomes *créditeur* /kreditœ/ meaning “one who credits.” This pattern is very regular and can be described through lexical morphology with a single rule:

$$\begin{array}{ccc} v \rightarrow \emptyset / __] & + & [\text{œ} \\ \text{verb} & & \text{suffix} \end{array}$$

The *eur* suffix can also be applied to verbs from other conjugation paradigms but the results are more difficult to describe and the necessary data to do so is lacking. For instance, *lire* /lir/, meaning “to read,” becomes *liseur* /lizœ/. There is no simple rule that would transform /ɾ/ into /z/ and use of this form is not widely documented (Valdman & Rottet 2010, p. 369) but it is interesting to note as being a case where the stem may be derived a post-lexical stratum as /liz/ is, in fact, a stem created through inflectional processes.

Another suffix which most often turns count nouns for trees into mass nouns—an Acadian French habit—is *ière* /jæ/ (Klingler et al. 1997, p. 166-167). For instance, *chêne* /ʃen/ meaning “oak tree” becomes *chênière* /ʃenjæ/ meaning “oak grove.” The pattern here can be described with two rules:

$v \rightarrow [i] / cc_] + [j\text{æ}]$

noun suffix

$cv \rightarrow \emptyset / v_] + [j\text{æ}]$

noun suffix

In all other cases, the suffix merely gets attached without any phonological changes occurring. The surface representation can be described through optimality theory constraints which favor CV syllables, which is a documented feature of Cajun French (Blainey 2013, p. 30). Furthermore, as the only examples which allow attaching of the suffix to a stem that ends in a consonant are stems that end in /n/, it is reasonable to conclude that /n/ is moraic in the language and does not greatly violate the regular CV syllable structures.

Denominal verbs can also occur in Cajun French, at times through the use of both a prefix and suffix as in *ensaquier* /ãsake/ meaning to put in a bag, which is derived from the noun *sac* /sak/ meaning bag. This is a simple example of affixation but not likely to be widespread as prefixes are thought to be rare in Cajun French even though the use of just /e/ to create a verb is “the most prominent component in the entire affixational system” (Klingler et al. 1997, p. 167).

An interesting form of affixation is the case of *aill* /aj/ which is infixated into verbs to create a “deprecatory” meaning (Klingler et al. 1997, p. 167). Examples include words like *casser* /kase/ meaning “to break” becoming *cassailler* /kasaje/. This infix has no phonological effect when used with verbs in the *er* conjugation paradigm and examples from other paradigms are lacking. Infixing appears to be unique to the Cajun variety of French. The interaction with semantics is also interesting in this case because the general meaning of the word does not change, nor its grammatical function, but the sense does. It would be tempting to classify *aill* as some sort of mood inflection instead of derivation but it would be necessary to show that it functions this way in a systematic way to make that assertion.

Compounds may or may not be very productive in Cajun French. Klingler et al. found

compounding through combinations such as noun + adjective, adjective + noun, and noun + preposition + optional determiner + noun (1997, p. 168-169) but it is difficult to see from the data given whether these are actual compounds or simply noun phrases. For instance, *nique à chien* /nik a ʃjẽ/ means “dog house” but this is obvious from the words used: *nique* means “den,” *chien* means “dog,” and *à* is a possessive marker. Furthermore, this compound has not been widely documented (Valdman & Rottet 2010, p. 132/415). Exocentric compounds are much clearer examples of compounding, leaving no room for ambiguity as to their status. For instance, *cheval diable* /ʃval dʒab/ means “praying mantis” and comes from the words for “horse” and “devil” (Klingler et al. 1997, p. 170).

Some examples of compounding are not analyzed in the literature but seem to be obvious compounds. *Quoifaire* /kofær/ means “why” in practically every French-speaking area of Louisiana (Valdman & Rottet 2010, p. 512). Here, the orthography suggests the word was derived from *quoi* /kwa/ meaning “what” and *faire* /fɛr/ meaning “to do/to make.” In fact, I have personally heard a native speaker use the pronunciation [kwaʔɛr] on a regular basis. The interrogative + verb combination seems to be fairly unique even among the Cajun French lexicon although one other interesting example would be *fais-dodo* /fedodo/, meaning “traditional dance event” (Valdman & Rottet 2010, p. 275). This compound stems from *fais* being the imperative form of “to do” and *dodo* being baby-talk for “sleep.” Anecdotally, the original verb phrase is still used even with English monolingual Cajuns while the compound has been described as stemming from the fact that children would often be brought to dances and be put to bed in a designated area so that the adults could dance. The verb + noun combination is similar to *quoifaire* but much more widespread and also incorporates both reduplication and onomatopoeia in *dodo* (Klingler et al. 1997, p. 171).

Nouns are often derived from onomatopoeia which regularly incorporates reduplication as in the words *cliclique* /kliklik/ meaning “bird of prey,” *quiquitte* /kikit/ meaning “chicken,” and *clouclouque* /klukluk/ meaning “bird.” These words all have in common a reference to birds of some

sort (Klingler et al. 1997, p. 171-172), falling in line with what seems to be a regular pattern of new words derivations mainly coming about to describe animals and plants. They also all follow similar phonological patterns. The original morpheme begins as a single syllable with a coda with the pattern C(C)VC while the reduplicants simply leave off the final C. Prosodic morphology can describe the pattern using a segmental approach:

C V – C V C

k i – k i t

What is left out of the above analysis is the existence of the second C in the other two examples which leads one to the conclusion that at least a prosodic approach is necessary. This would lead one to mark the reduplicant as the onset and nucleus of the source morpheme:

O N – σ

kl i – klik

Optimality theory could also be brought in to describe the reduplicant, ranking NoCoda higher than MAX-IO.

An interesting case of a noun derived from onomatopoeia involving reduplication is the word *ouaouaron* /wawarɔ̃/, meaning “frog” (Klingler et al. 1997, p. 171). This is the most common word for “frog” in the language even though the Standard French *grenouille* exists (Valdman & Rottet 2010, p. 321/430). In this case, it appears that the original morpheme was /wa/, which became /wawa/ through total reduplication following the above rules, and then /rɔ̃/ was added to convert a simple instance of onomatopoeia into an actual noun. The problem here is that /rɔ̃/ is not mentioned in morphological descriptions as an affix that would create a noun, making this appear as a unique case. However, various other pronunciations are attested to, confusing the matter: [warwarɔ̃] and [wararɔ̃] (Valdman & Rottet 2010, p. 430). The ambiguity created through the various representations makes it impossible to describe the derivational processes for this word: the first explanation could suffice, an explanation

where the onset + nucleus preference is violated by maintaining the coda of the syllable as in the second pronunciation, or an even more complicated explanation that involves assimilation could be employed using the third pronunciation.

Borrowing presents a special problem for the morphology of Cajun French as nearly all speakers are also fluent speakers or native speakers of English. As such, it is very difficult to determine whether a speaker is simply filling in a lexical gap by using an English word or whether the word has been wholly assimilated into the Cajun French lexicon. Blyth suggests that the criteria for disambiguating between gap fillers and borrowings should be the frequency of use. He argues that older more fluent speakers will regularly use words such as *drive*, *retire*, *le pickup truck*, and *le cholesterol* while younger less fluent speakers will fail to employ these forms, showing that they are assimilated into the language in a way that is difficult for those with less exposure to the use of Cajun French to pick up (Blyth 1997, p. 42).

Confusing the issue is phonological assimilation or the lack thereof. *Drive*, for instance, has been documented as both [dɾajv], which is arguably completely unmodified from English, and [drajv], which is changed to match Cajun French pronunciation, although the final consonant cluster or diphthong nucleus of the latter pronunciation—depending on how one breaks up the syllable as well as treats the [j]—places doubt as to whether the word is fully assimilated phonologically or not.

An arguably clearer example of a fully assimilated pronunciation is the word *back* /bæk/ (Valdman & Rottet 2010, p. 53). Following Blainey's finding that [æ] is a possible surface representation of /a/, particularly before velar stops (i.e. /k/) (Blainey 2013, p. 94-95), it is possible that /bæk/ is really the phonetic realization ([bæk]) of /bak/. In fact, [bæk] is the only documented representation of the word when used as an adverb but [bak] also exists when used as a verb (Valdman & Rottet 2010, p. 53). Of course, more data would be required to determine whether this is simply a

coincidence. It would also be interesting to determine if the presence of the realization [bak] for the verb is an indication that the word is fully assimilated for that grammatical category but not as an adverb.

The difficulties presented by borrowings may be what led Klingler et al. to posit that English borrowings are “stripped of all inflection, be it English or CF [Cajun French]” (Klingler et al. 1997, p. 174). The argument is that speakers are employing a compromise between wholesale abandonment of Cajun French for English and attempting to build new words in a language thought to be almost completely unproductive (Klingler et al. 1997, p. 161). Words like *retire* will not only avoid being verbalized as *retirer* /ʔitaʔe/ but will also avoid English inflections such as *retires* or *retiring*. Following Klingler et al.'s proposition and ignoring possible discrepancies such as *back*, an optimality theory tableau can represent the high ranking of faithfulness in borrowed words:

ʔi.taʔ	MAX-IO	DEP-IO	{-ʔ}	{-Diphthong}	NoCoda
re.ti.re	****	*****			
əʔ.ti.re	****	*****			*
ʔi.taʔ.re	**	***		*	
ʔi.taʔ.ʔe		*	**	*	
→ ʔi.taʔ			**	*	*

Blyth argues against the idea that borrowed words are universally stripped of inflectional properties and takes a nuanced approach towards syntactic influences on Cajun French morphology, suggesting that verbs will regularly be suffixed as with native verbs so that *wring* becomes *wringer* /ɪŋe/ while inflections are not employed in the perfect past tense so that the English *draw* remains in *j'ai draw* (Blyth 1997, p. 41-42). He draws on specific cases in the speech of older people as opposed to a large corpus but the results make sense when considering how tense inflection functions in the

language normally. Verbs within the *er* /e/ conjugation paradigm, the most common in the language, do not change phonologically when creating the perfect past tense. *Parler*, the infinitive, is written *parlé* in the perfect past tense yet the pronunciation remains /parle/. With this in mind, it is possible that the past perfect tense looks to the English source material still instead of the assimilated infinitive. Perhaps Blyth was actually documenting instances of partial assimilation, which is supported by the fact that neither *wring* nor *wringer* appear in the recent Dictionary of Louisiana French while *draw* does and solely in a noninflected form (Valdman & Rottet 2010, p. 222).

Although Romance languages are often thought of as being inflectional languages, as in the case of Spanish, French is relatively analytical. Cajun French seems to be moving even further in this direction than Standard French and it has even been noted that “the speech of younger CF [Cajun French] speakers is less inflected than that of the older generation” (citing Byers 1988 in Papen & Rottet 1997, p. 97). For example, plurality is based on determiners as opposed to inflection as is the gender of nouns in almost every case (Klingler et al. 1997, p. 175; Papen & Rottet 1997, p. 78). There is little reason to doubt the former claim since, while there are occasional phonetic changes at the end of a noun when forming a plural, the most consistent number marker is the determiner which is required by syntax in most cases, possibly for just this reason. For instance, while *le journal* /lə ʒurnal/, meaning “the newspaper,” becomes *les journaux* /le ʒurno/ when made plural, displaying a change in the determiner as well the noun, the noun *le jour* /lə ʒur/, meaning “the day,” becomes *les jours* /le ʒur/ when made plural, displaying a change in the determiner only.

The latter claim, that gender is based on determiners, is more troublesome. For instance, *le premier* /lə prəmje/ meaning “the first” is masculine while *la première* /la prəmje/ is the feminine form. There is only a slight change in vowel height between these two forms but a rather obvious change in the vowel in the determiner. In Standard French, a final /r/ would be pronounced in the feminine form, helping to disambiguate the two without the help of the determiner (Corréard & Grundy 1995, p. 469).

but word final /t/ is regularly deleted in Cajun French (Valdman & Rottet 2010, p. xxxix). The counter-argument to this lack of a clear distinction in gender in Cajun French when looking solely at the noun is the fact that /ɛ/ before /t/ is often realized as [æ] (Blainey 2013, p. 92-93). Nouns falling within a different paradigm such as *le travailleur* /lə travajœ/, meaning “the worker,” should be less ambiguous as to whether the determiner is the main marker indicating gender or not as its feminine form is *la travailleuse* /la travajøz/ (Valdman & Rottet 2010, p. 631). Final /z/ is not normally deleted in Cajun French so that, even though the vowel is only raised a slight amount, the final consonant is still a clear indication of gender. However, while this feminine form is attested to in the Dictionary of Louisiana French, my personal communications with a native speaker indicate that this form may not be widely used, perhaps because the masculine form is applied in all cases or perhaps because sociological conditions make it unlikely that one would come across a female worker in my informant's area of Louisiana.

Verbs in Standard French are inflected to match their subjects but often only for two or three subjects as opposed to all nine possible subjects. For instance, *parler* is /parl(ə)/ with all subjects in the present tense except for “we” /parlɔ̃/ and “you (formal or pl.)” /parle/. While these forms are possible in Cajun French, the respective pronouns *nous* /nu/ and *vous* /vu/ are rarely used. The subject pronouns replacing them, *tu*, (*nous-autres*) *on*, and *vous-autres*, would all use the same inflection as all the other Cajun French subject pronouns: /parl/. Papen & Rottet mention that “there is a tendency to reduce most verbs to one invariant uninflected form per tense, corresponding to that of SF [Standard French] third person singular” (1997, p. 96). Even words, like *aller* meaning “to go,” which on the Leipzig-Jakarta list and are, in fact, considered irregular verbal inflections are more consistently inflected in Cajun French than Standard French. The former, in the present tense, would yield the forms /ve/, /va/, /vɔ̃/, /alɔ̃/, and /ale/ while the latter would only yield /va/ and /vɔ̃/. Indeed, even /vɔ̃/, the form that agrees with the subject pronoun *ils* meaning “they” can easily be avoided by using the subject pronouns *ça*,

eusse, or *eux-autres*, all of which also mean “they” but entail the inflection /va/.

Cajun French has been described morphologically as a language that almost completely lacks word formation productivity. Klingler et al. go so far as to say, “Lexicogenetic strategies surveyed in this chapter are for the most part vestiges of the past” (1997, p. 174). This claim is based on a definition of derivative morphemes as those which fit stable and consistent formation processes and which can also be demonstrably shown to come from an interior source (citing Bull 1989 in Klingler et al. 1997, p. 162). The fallacy here is that Cajun French seems to be treated throughout as a completely independent language with no relation to Standard French at all. If a derivational process exists in Standard French or any other variety of French at all, it is excluded from the possibility of being a productive process in Cajun French. For instance, the previously mentioned suffix *ment* is not mentioned by Klingler et al. (1997) while Papen & Rottet explicitly claim that it is no longer productive (1997, p. 92) yet this is an extremely productive suffix in Standard French, even taking up an entire lesson in a recent university level French textbook (Amon, Muyskens, Omaggio Hadley, p. 340). Personal experience with my informant suggests that this concept is not lost on Cajun French speakers at all.

It is difficult to imagine how a widely used word formation process could be unproductive simply in general for a language that is still learned as a first language. Unproductive processes in English, such as forming the past using ablaut, seem to go hand in hand with relatively few remaining examples, rendering it difficult to grasp the pattern, whereas the English suffix *ed* is almost everywhere. Similarly, a French suffix like *ment*, which is indicative of adverbs and finds a very wide and consistent distribution even in Cajun French, must surely have a clear meaning to speakers. While there may be plenty of other reasons to churn out the ubiquitous refrain, “Cajun French is a dying language,” existing morphological analyses can only do so through selective criteria which cannot be easily applied to a dialect as they can be to a language.

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