



Conversational Cajun French 1

By Randall P. Whatley and Harry Jannise

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RANDALL P. WHATLEY and HARRY JANNISE



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This book is dedicated to the millions of Cajuns who preserved the Cajun French language by word of mouth despite ridicule and legal prohibitions.

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The word “Cajun” describes the people who are descendants of the Acadians that were exiled from Nova Scotia in 1755. Today, all people in Louisiana with a French heritage are mistakenly called Cajuns, whether their ancestors came from Nova Scotia, France, Canada, Haiti, Belgium or any other French-speaking country.

To Cajuns themselves, however, the word “Cajun” has a meaning of its own. When speaking French, many Cajuns do not refer to themselves as being “Français” or “Cajin,” but rather as being “Créole.” But when these same people speak English they refer to themselves as being simply “French.” To a Cajun, a “Français” is a person from France, and a “Cajin” is a Louisiana-Frenchman, and a “Créole” is a French-speaking black. In short, when a Cajun is speaking French, he refers to himself as being “Créole.” When he is speaking English, a Cajun refers to himself as being “French.”

This example shows the mystery and intrigue of the Cajuns, which most people know nothing about.

INTRODUCTION

Most of the first French settlements in the New World were in the area of present-day Canada. Some also settled in the area now known as Nova Scotia. They named their settlement “Arcadia,” after a popular Italian poem written in the 1400s, about a utopian land. Apparently, when the French first saw the magnificent beauty of Nova Scotia, they were reminded of the beauty described in *l’Arcadia* and named the land after it. In time the “r” was dropped from Arcadia and the settlement became known as Acadia.

The actual story of the Acadian exile was best told in 1959 by Dr. Harry Oster in the booklet titled *Folksongs of the Louisiana Acadians*.

The dramatic and tragic Acadian story begins when the first French colony in the New World was established in Acadia (modern Nova Scotia) in 1604 by settlers from provinces of northern France—Brittany, Normandy, and Picardy.

During Queen Anne’s War the English won control of Acadia. According to the Treaty of Utrecht of April 13, 1713, the Acadians were to enjoy the free exercise of their religion, the choice either to remain in the country, keeping the ownership of all they possessed, or to leave the country, taking away with them all their movable goods and also the proceeds of the sale of their movable property.

Despite the apparent freedom of the choice the British

granted the French colonists, the governors were actually quite reluctant to permit the Acadians to settle in any other part of Canada, for they feared the influx of a substantial number of Acadians into another part of the country would create a concentration of Frenchmen potentially dangerous to British rule. Also, the British rulers took a sterner stand in their official demands; they insisted that either the Acadians “take an unrestricted oath of allegiance to the British crown or leave Acadia without taking their possessions.” Although the Acadians refused to take an unrestricted oath, the English did not begin to dig their claws into the settlers until General Phillips came from Annapolis in 1720 to take over as governor. Almost at once Phillips ordered the settlers to “take the oath of allegiance without any reservations or to leave the country within four months without being able either to sell their possessions or to transport them.” When the Acadians took him at his word and began arranging for their departure, Phillips expressed his annoyance at their refusal to take the oath by doing everything he could to prevent their leaving. The sentiments of his administration are amply clear in a letter Craggs, his Secretary of State, wrote him:

My dear Phillips:

I see you do not get the better of the Acadians as you expected . . . It is singular all the same that these people should have preferred to lose their goods rather than be exposed to fight against their brethren. This sentimentality is stupid. These people are evidently too much attached to their fellowmen and to their religion to make true Englishmen . . . The Treaty be hanged! Don't bother about justice and other baubles . . . Their departure will doubtless increase the power of France; it must not be so; they must eventually be transported to some other place, where mingling with our subjects, they will soon lose their language, their religion, and their remembrance of the past, to become true Englishmen.

Although Phillips finally accepted a restricted oath of allegiance which would exempt the Acadians from

bearing arms against their own countrymen and Indian allies, the British government, when it was expedient to do so, declared the oath invalid on the technicality that Parliament had not given its consent.

In the French and Indian War, which began in 1747, the English and French once more locked horns in another of their innumerable wars. Lawrence, the governor of Acadia at that time, plotted secretly to exile the Acadians from Canada and to expropriate their rich lands. Since the British had brought over twenty-five hundred settlers from England in 1748 and established the city of Halifax, the government decided that the Acadians had outlived their usefulness to the empire. Lawrence insisted that the inhabitants of Grand Pre take an unqualified oath of allegiance to the English crown, swearing loyalty forever to England and agreeing to bear arms against her enemies.

When most of the Acadians refused, Lawrence summoned the men of Grand Pre to the village church on September 5, 1755. There Lawrence's aid, Winslow, read them their cruel fate, "That your lands and Tenements; cattle of all kinds and Live Stock of all Sorts are forfeited to the Crown with all your Effects, Saving your money and Household goods; and yourselves to be removed from his province." Winslow then put the assembled four hundred and eighteen men of Grand Pre and vicinity under arrest.

Five days later the young men, the most likely source of rebellion, were forced onto the five transports then available.

As the two hundred and fifty young men were lined up between files of soldiers with fixed bayonets, the scene of grief that followed is almost indescribable. Every evidence of grief and excitement became manifest—cries of anger, tears, and pleading for mercy, stubborn refusal to march, calling of father to son and son to father, of brother to brother . . . A great many people from the village lined the road to the landing place, a distance of a mile and a half away, and as the young men moved down the road between the files of soldiers, praying, crying, singing, many of the assembled people fell on their knees and prayed or followed with wailing and lamentation.

As soon as the other Acadians had been driven from their farms, Winslow ordered the buildings burned to the ground, often before the eyes of their agonized owners.

During the next eleven years the British continued to deport Acadians, more than eight thousand of them, four thousand of whom died at sea of smallpox and other diseases. The surviving exiles were scattered widely, at first to New Haven, Boston, New York, Philadelphia, Hampton Roads, Charleston, and Savannah—usually without advance notice to the governors. Almost everywhere their reception was cold; the Governor of Virginia sheltered them through the winter, but sent them to England in the spring. Philadelphia received them reluctantly, and Governor Reynolds of Georgia banished them as soon as they arrived because of a statute which forbade the settling of Catholics. Since almost everywhere the pathetic exiles found themselves unwanted, most of them pushed on to Louisiana, hoping to join other Frenchmen.

When the first group reached Louisiana in 1756, the French and Spanish welcomed them and helped them settle in the southwest of the state.

The story about the Louisiana Cajun begins with the exploration of the New World by French explorers. The French that LaSalle and other French-speaking explorers spoke, now called “17th century French,” is the basis for the Cajun French language. When Quebec, the first permanent French settlement in North America, was founded in 1604, “Standard French” did not exist. Instead, fifteen different dialects of French were spoken in France.

One of these dialects, *Françien*, was spoken in and around Paris, but wasn't any more “pure” than the other fourteen dialects. But since Paris was the French capital, *Françien* was proclaimed the official court language in 1539, and all other dialects were banned from usage. Later, in 1633, forty of the most elite men in France met and formed the French

Academy (l'Académie Française) under the direction of Cardinal Richelieu. They were mostly aristocratic politicians, military generals and royalty. The purpose of the French Academy, which is still in existence today, was to decide what was acceptable and not acceptable as official French usage. At the first meeting of the "Big Forty" in 1633, the members declared that the official court language, *Françien*, would be the acceptable language of France and its provinces. This edict, however, carried very little weight with the majority of the people, and they continued to speak their own dialect of French, and most Frenchmen still do today. So "Standard French," sometimes called "Parisian French" and incorrectly called "Pure French," is essentially a dialect like any other. Nevertheless, as the official language of the entire country, from then on, *Françien* was the only language allowed to be used in legal matters and in all schools in France. Only by force could these two proclamations become fully effective. This force was to be used again later on the Cajuns.

The Acadians became known simply as Cajuns and adapted very quickly to Louisiana. Soon they began doing something which they were able to do up until World War II; they began assimilating other cultures.

The Germans had been brought to Louisiana in the early 1700s by John Law to aid in the settlement and development of Louisiana. Soon the Germans and the Cajuns began intermarrying, and the Germans became less German and more Cajun with each passing generation. As evidence of this, some of the most common Cajun surnames in some regions of Louisiana are originally German names like Huval, Schexnayder, Waguespack, and Zeringue.

It is remarkable, however, that there are no German words, with the exception of surnames, in the Cajun French vocabulary. But the most important German influence on the Cajuns was probably the accordian. Traditionally a German instrument, no Cajun band is complete without one today. The discovery of this instrument must have been a joy for the Acadians. Their own music, which was played on twin fiddles and spoons or a triangle, had lagged for several years because when they were exiled from Acadia, they weren't permitted to bring musical instruments with them.

The Cajun also assimilated the Spanish. When the first Acadians arrived in 1756, Louisiana was under Spanish rule. But the Acadians, like the French who were here before them, never really recognized the Spanish and continued to be loyal to France. The Spanish and the Cajuns also intermarried, which made the Spanish less Spanish and more Cajun. Most of the marriages were between Spanish men and French or Cajun women. It is interesting to note that in the case of these marriages, the children usually spoke the language of the mother, which was French. After a couple generations, the Ortegos, Diazes, and Romeros were Cajuns.

Unlike German, there are many Spanish words in the Cajun French vocabulary, words like **tabasco** and **pias**. Perhaps the most important Spanish influence of Cajun French is linguistic. It seems that when the Spanish began speaking French, they did it with a Spanish accent. The result is that the "r" in Cajun French is a Spanish "r," trilled on the tip of the tongue instead of the guttural "r" of modern French.

Since many of the early Acadian settlers were hunters, trappers, and fishermen, they mingled with the Indians quite a bit. Although the Cajuns did not completely assimilate the Indians, there exists an Indian influence in Cajun French. Words like **filé** and **bayou** are Indian in origin.

The Cajuns were also influenced by people of African blood. Intermarriages between blacks and whites in New Orleans was especially commonplace. In rural areas, intermarriages also existed, but the true bond between the blacks and the Cajuns was their common economic class, the lowest one possible, which is still true today. Cajun French words like **gombo** are African in origin.

The Cajuns lived isolated from the rest of the world and remained very proud of their French heritage until the 1920s. Then, everything that could possibly happen to destroy the Cajun culture and language began happening.

First, when public schools came into general existence and compulsory attendance laws were passed, French was forbidden to be spoken on the school grounds. Supposedly, the purpose of this law was to force Cajun children to learn English, so that they would be able to live in an Anglo-Saxon dominated society. The effect of this law was that to be Cajun and to speak Cajun French was illegal, so people no longer wanted to be that way.

Huey Long's road-building program, hailed by many because it ended much of the isolation of the people in the rural areas, also dealt a death blow to the Cajun culture. These new roads were nothing more for the Cajuns than "avenues of Americanization."

And then there's the influence of industrialization,

principally the oil and gas industry. The influence of Cajuns on this industry is seldom appreciated. They not only did most of the dirty work on the rigs, but often a sly oil company representative took advantage of Cajuns to get oil and gas reserves for little or nothing. As one old Cajun once said, "If they wouldn't have built all them new roads and bridges, maybe that big oil company lawyer wouldn't have found me so he could steal my land."

The two biggest influences on the Cajuns in the twentieth century have been World War II and television. World War II gave more Cajuns, mostly men, a chance to see the outside world than anything before or since. For the first time, Cajuns were exposed to something more than their ancestors had been. After a Cajun boy had ridden a train, heard other music, and eaten other foods than he was accustomed to, he didn't view home as he had before. World War II took the young men, the life-blood of the Cajuns, off the farm and out of the swamp. The effect of this was two-fold. One, the fathers no longer had help to farm the land and run the trapping lines. Two, when the Cajuns returned, they had skills which they did not have before, and they went to the city instead of home to use those new-found skills.

After all of these things maimed the true Cajun culture and language, television came along and killed it. That murder, in part, can be considered mercy killing, because by 1950, when television became prominent in most Cajun households, the Cajuns were stripped of their culture and language and were unable to learn the American culture and language. Television provided that means. Television simply taught Cajuns how to speak English. Not only did

television make Cajuns bilingual, it finished off what was left of their culture. With the advent of television, came the disappearance of the last true Cajun custom, **la veille**. **La veille** was the custom of going to neighbors' houses at night to talk and socialize until bedtime. Until television, all Cajuns either went somewhere or received company every night.

A WORD FROM THE AUTHORS

Both of us are Cajuns who speak Cajun French as well as or better than we do English. Although both of us have studied Standard French in college, neither has a degree in French or a degree in anything for that matter. We are only Cajuns who would like to tell our side of the story, so to speak.

This book was originally written for a series of informal conversational Cajun French classes taught for the LSU Union in Baton Rouge. However, when we found that Cajun French could be written and that it wasn't as hard as is believed, we decided to expand our book and this is the result of our efforts.

There are several things which we have tried to accomplish in this book. First, we have tried to use those words and phrases which are widely used and can be understood almost anywhere in Louisiana. There are three main dialects of Cajun French: (1) "le français de meche" (Marsh French), which is spoken in places like Cameron, Bayou Lafourche, Cut Off, etc., or the marsh lands, (2) "le français de grand bois," (Big Woods French), which is spoken in places like Grand Prairie, Dupont, and Marksville, or the wooded areas, and (3) "le français de prairie" (Prairie French), which is spoken in places like Scott, Iota, Crowley, etc., or

the prairie country. There are also subdialects for towns and regions and even families, but the differences are far outnumbered by the similarities.

These differences occur because Cajun French was passed on merely by word of mouth for over two hundred years, and the speech patterns of people had as much to do with what they taught their children and grandchildren as anything.

For instance, if a person had trouble pronouncing the “d” in a word like **Lindi** (Monday) he might have pronounced the “d” like a “z”, and all of those who learned Cajun French from him and those taught by him pronounced their “d’s” like “z’s”. Since Cajun French hasn’t been written until now, people were unable to refer to written material for aids to pronunciation, and that is why Cajuns run so many words together and shorten others when they speak. In Standard French, **à cette heure** means at this time or now. When pronounced fast, it comes out **aseteur**, and this is the way Cajuns pronounce it.

We have also tried to write Cajun French as closely as possible to Standard French form without losing the pronunciation of Cajun French. This was very difficult at times, and surely there are instances where we failed to either write it close to Standard French or close to the Cajun pronunciation. About sixty percent of the words in this book, or sixty percent of Cajun French vocabulary, for that matter, can be found in any Standard French dictionary. The other forty percent are unique to Cajun French. If one has difficulty with Cajun French pronunciation or would like to accurately capture the Cajun French accent, tapes are available for this.

Most importantly, we have tried to set a precedent with this book. We have proven that Cajun French can be written, and we hope that from now on it will be written. We intend to follow this book up with perhaps four or five more volumes until we record the entire Cajun French vocabulary. If we are indeed able to write Cajun French on paper and record it on tape, anyone who desires to learn Cajun French should be able to do so.

What we have tried to avoid is “detail.” We have done this for two reasons. First, the survival of the Cajun French Language is at a crucial stage. We can not afford to get caught up in arguments about which is right or wrong, and what is the rule. We need to preserve any piece or part of the Cajun French Language and culture we can instead of arguing over what to choose. Secondly, we intend to come back with several more volumes of this book and would like to treat other subjects more thoroughly.

It should be remembered that this is *Conversational Cajun French I*. This book is designed to teach beginning speakers the basics. It is also designed to be taught by a qualified instructor or to be learned in conjunction with the tapes. Nevertheless, if one knows every word and phrase in this book, he should be able to speak Cajun French well enough to converse with Cajuns or at least enough to stay out of trouble in south Louisiana.

RANDALL P. WHATLEY

HARRY JANNISE

GUIDE TO PRONUNCIATION

Vowels

Letter	French Example	Nearest English Sound
à	là	d <u>o</u> ck
â	âge	b <u>o</u> x
au	chaud	v <u>o</u> te
é	zéro	p <u>a</u> y, t <u>i</u> ck
è	fêtes	ch <u>e</u> ck
î	plaît	b <u>ee</u> s
ì	vîte	t <u>ee</u> th
ò	grösse	b <u>o</u> ss
ô	seau	g <u>o</u>
û	poûle	t <u>oo</u> l

Consonants

Letter	French Example	Nearest English Sound
b	bouton	<u>b</u> oy
c	corset	<u>c</u> ar
ç	français	<u>s</u> ay
d	danse	<u>d</u> og
f	fille	<u>f</u> at
g	gallon	<u>g</u> o
h	haler	<u>h</u> oe
j	juif	<u>m</u> ea <u>s</u> ure
k	kaki	<u>k</u> ite
l	lait	<u>l</u> ike
m	Mamou	<u>m</u> ake
n	non	<u>n</u> o
o	front	<u>c</u> o <u>n</u> e
p	pistache	<u>p</u> ull
r	raison	<u>r</u> un (trilled on tip of tongue)
s	salle	<u>s</u> ight
t	ton	<u>t</u> urn
v	vous	<u>v</u> ote
w	wagon	<u>w</u> et
y	crayon	<u>y</u> es
z	zinc	<u>z</u> oo