

LOUISIANA FRENCH

A NEW DICTIONARY EXPLORES OUR LANGUAGE

A people's culture is defined by their history, landscape and language. And the recently published *Dictionary of Louisiana French As Spoken in Cajun, Creole and American Indian Communities* offers the most comprehensive window yet into the spoken language that has helped define South Louisiana's cultural uniqueness, separating the *Cadien* and *Creole*, from the *Mericaïn*.

At nearly 900 pages, it is both a hefty authoritative reference and fascinating glimpse into Louisiana French speech from the 1930s to the present.

Two University of Louisiana at Lafayette professors, Dr. Barry Jean Ancelet and Dr. Tamara Linder, are among the editing team for the dictionary, published by the University Press of Mississippi with research funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities. The concept of this dictionary was born 20 years ago in discussions between Albert Valdman, the book's senior editor, Barry Ancelet and David Barry, now dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at the University of Louisiana at Lafayette.

Entries include each word in conventional French spelling, complete with pronunciation and variants, English equivalents and common phrases. The information was collected from written sources or recordings, as well as interviews with over 125 people from five regions of South Louisiana. For ease of use the dictionary offers both Louisiana French-to-English and English-to-Louisiana French sections.

Like our cuisine, Louisiana French is a fragrant blending of a variety of influences. As the dictionary's preface notes, Louisiana became a French colony in 1682 when a team of French Canadian explorers reached the mouth of the Mississippi, naming the territory for Louis XIV, the French king. Only the southernmost portion attracted a concentration of French settlers and it was this group that carried Louisiana's French language and culture into the 21st century.

The variations of French spoken here today reflect the influence of three distinct waves of immigration, according to the preface. The first wave were colonists from France and Quebec who moved to Louisiana during the French colonial period of 1699 to 1762. These colonists' "modest social origins...along with their limited access to education, meant that French in Louisiana would be further distinguished from Standard French by its incorporation of many features typical of the informal spoken style usually referred to as *français populaire* ('Folk French')."

The Spanish and the British were responsible for a second wave of immigration between 1764 and 1785. The Spanish, who assumed control of the colony in 1762, welcomed approximately 3,000

Acadian exiles after the British forced them in 1755 from their homeland in what is now Nova Scotia. The variety of French spoken by these Acadian exiles contained similarities with the dialect of western France.

Finally, in the first half of the 19th century, Louisiana's flourishing plantation economy attracted new French speakers from a former French colony in what is now Haiti, as well from France itself. Many were highly educated and brought a variety of language close to standard French. This version has largely disappeared, but the language of the other two groups merged to become what is often called Cajun French, although the broader term Louisiana French

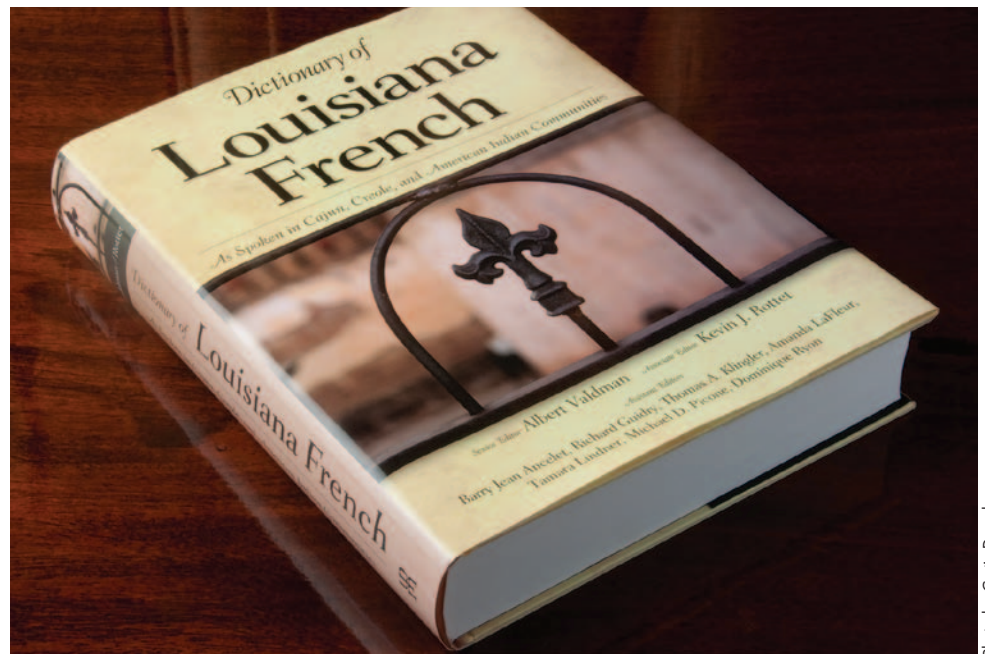


Photo by Curtis Dorrch

reflects its usage by many Creoles of color and American Indians.

Leafing through the dictionary will be fascinating for current generations who may have heard *grand-père* or *grand-mère* season their conversations with French phrases or who puzzle over the origins of place names or the French lyrics in Cajun and zydeco music (Lucky Account Number 4500045400).

From colloquial exclamations (*Hé la-bas!*: Hey over there!) to landscape features that give rise to place names (*anse*: either the semicircular handle of a cooking pot or a bay or land area partially enclosed by wood and opening onto a prairie), definitions are often accompanied by examples of usage gathered by the researchers.

Although important to scholars, this dictionary is also important to anyone with ties to South Louisiana. It is an exploration of our cultural underpinnings—the Louisiana French language. ●

The hardcover Dictionary of Louisiana French lists for \$38. It is available from bookstores including Barnes & Noble, from Amazon.com or from the University of Mississippi Press (1-800-737-7788 toll free, <http://www.upress.state.ms.us/about/ordering>).