

## THE FRENCH LANGUAGE IN LOUISIANA FRANÇAIS COLONIAL

LOUISIANA FRENCH refers to variations of the [French language](#) spoken in [Louisiana](#). The most prominent varieties are:

- [Colonial French](#) or [Plantation Society French](#), a formerly common dialect now rare though still in existence. Non-Acadian French Ethnic groups in AVOYELLES, Iberia, Pointe Coupée, St. Charles, St. Landry, St. Mary, St. Martin, St. Tammany, and other parishes south of Orleans, still speak Colonial French, as opposed to Cajun.
- [Cajun French](#) (Acadian) centered in the South West of the state
- [Louisiana Creole French](#) centered in the South East of the state (although this is technically a separate language distinguishable from its mother tongue French by its grammar. It shares many similarities with the Creoles of the Caribbean)

COLONIAL FRENCH or COLONIAL LOUISIANA FRENCH is one of the three [dialects](#) into which [Louisiana French](#) is typically divided (the others being [Cajun French](#) and [Louisiana Creole French](#)). Formerly spoken widely in what is now the [U.S. state](#) of [Louisiana](#), it is now considered to have largely merged with the Cajun dialect of [Louisiana Regional French](#).<sup>[uu]</sup>

Colonial French is conventionally described as the form of [French](#) spoken in [Lower French Louisiana](#) prior to the mass arrival of [Acadians](#) after the [Great Upheaval](#) of the mid-18th century, which resulted in the birth of the Cajun dialect. The [prestige dialect](#) still used by some [Cajuns](#) is often identified as deriving from Colonial French, but some linguists differentiate between the two, referring to the latter as PLANTATION SOCIETY FRENCH.<sup>[uu]</sup>

### Description

Historically spoken by a part of the [Louisiana Creole](#) population in lower [French Louisiana](#), Colonial French is generally considered to be nearly extinct as a separate variety today.<sup>[uu]</sup> Most linguists consider it to have largely merged with [Cajun French](#), which is distinguishable from [Louisiana Creole French](#).<sup>[u]</sup> There are populations of Creoles and other ethnic groups in the parishes of [St. Martin](#), [Avoyelles](#), [Iberia](#), [Pointe-Coupée](#), [St. Charles](#), [St. Landry](#), [St. Mary](#), [St. Tammany](#), [Plaquemines](#), and other parishes south of [Orleans](#), that still speak Colonial French, as opposed to Cajun. White and [Native American](#) speakers of Colonial French are often considered by outsiders to belong to [Cajun](#) culture, though this classification has not been traditionally welcomed by white Creoles (Brasseaux).

Linguist Michael Picone of the University of Alabama introduced the term *Plantation Society French* in 1998,<sup>[u]</sup> to distinguish the [prestige dialect](#) spoken by Creoles, both white and [of color](#), after the [standard French](#) of the mid-19th century,<sup>[u]</sup> from the more traditional definition of "Colonial French" as the older dialect introduced into [French Louisiana](#) before the [Cajun migration](#). There is a history of [diglossia](#) with Louisiana Creole French.<sup>[u]</sup> Plantation Society French, at any rate, is quite close to the Standard French of the time of its origin, with some possible differences in pronunciation and vocabulary use.<sup>[u]</sup>


*\*See Addendum below on the meaning of Creole and on Avoyelles colloquialisms in French today. – Sheldon Roy*

### References

1. <sup>[u]</sup> <sup>[u]</sup> ["What is Cajun French?"](#). Department of French Studies, Louisiana State University. Retrieved September 3, 2010.
2. <sup>[u]</sup> <sup>[u]</sup> <sup>[u]</sup> <sup>[u]</sup> <sup>[u]</sup> [Cane River Valley French - Languages and Labels](#) - Tulane University
3. <sup>[u]</sup> <sup>[u]</sup> <sup>[u]</sup> Picone, Michael. The Rise and Fall of Plantation Society French (abstract) 2003, presented at the Creole Studies Conference: Creole Legacies, New Orleans, October 23-25, 2003.
4. Squint, Kirstin. ["A Linguistic and Cultural Comparison of Haitian Creole and Louisiana Creole"](#) *Postcolonial Text*, Vol 1, No 2 (2005).

### Bibliography

- Brasseaux, Carl A (2005). French, Cajun, Creole, Houma: A Primer on Francophone Louisiana. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Colonial French (Français Colonial) Spoken in  [United States](#) Region [State of Louisiana](#)  
[Language extinction](#) "virtually" extinct; melded with [Cajun French](#)  
[Language family Indo-European](#)

- [Italic](#)
  - [Romance](#)
    - [Italo-Western](#)
      - Western
        - [Gallo-Iberian](#)
          - [Gallo-Romance](#)
            - Gallo-Rhaetian
              - [Oïl](#)
                - [French](#)
                  - [Louisiana French](#)
                    - COLONIAL FRENCH

[Linguasphere](#) – **Note:** This page may contain [IPA](#) phonetic symbols in [Unicode](#).

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## CREOLE OR FRENCH LANGUAGE: WHAT'S THE DIFFERENCE?

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So in Louisiana, the linguistic climate is very interesting. There's French and there's Creole.

FRENCH is spoken natively throughout the state, as far north as Natchitoches parish and across the entire southern region by Creoles and Cajuns. There are, however, three regional dialects spoken: Cajun, Colonial/Plantation Society French and Napoleonic French.

Cajun, a corruption of the french word for "Acadien" /ah kah jan'/ (Acadian), came to Louisiana with the Acadians who were exiled from Nova Scotia beginning in the 1750s. I won't recount that history, because it's already well told and publications are readily available. Cajun is only spoken within the southwestern cultural area unofficially known as Acadiana (22 parishes of the southern portion of the state where the Acadians settled).

Colonial or Plantation Society French, is the oldest form of French spoken in Louisiana today. It dates back to the founding of the colony. It was the language spoken by the Louisiana French, Creole, and Spanish aristocracy. Newspapers, civil/public notices, all civil records, operas, theatre/plays, instruction (all levels of education) were conducted in Colonial French. The aristocracy, usually sent their sons off to France for education, but the most humble aristocrats could only hire private tutors from France, Belgium, Canada and French-speaking Switzerland. Colonial French was therefore found along the banks of Louisiana waterways or bayous, where aristocratic families established plantations (hence the "Plantation Society French" expression). Therefore Colonial French was spoken and is spoken today in Natchitoches parish, Avoyelles, Pointe-Coupée, Saint-Landry, Saint-Martin, Iberia, St. Mary, Lafayette, St. James, St. John the Baptist, St. Charles, St. Bernard, St. Tammany, Orléans, Ascension, West Baton-Rouge parishes. Colonial can also be heard in typically cajun-speaking parishes were aristocratic free creoles of color settled, such as Évangéline and Acadia parishes.

Napoleonic French is a dialect spoken by French who sought refuge in Louisiana during Napoléon Bonaparte's reign of terror (1804-1814). Those families all settled in Lafourche and Terrebonne parishes and their descendants remain there today.

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CREOLE, contrary to popular belief, is neither a dialect nor a patois nor whichever other derogatory term is used to describe it, but a bona fide language. To make a long story short, it was the language created from the interaction between the French and African slaves on plantations. Fully two-thirds of slaves sent to Louisiana during the first French and Spanish régimes hailed from Senegambia (nowadays Sénégal, the Gambia, and parts of Mali), but were from many different kingdoms, nations and linguistic groups. Therefore in Louisiana, cultural and civil constraints placed on slaves ultimately led to the birth of CREOLE, whose vocabulary is 95% French and 4% combination of lexicon of various african languages, .05% Spanish and .05% Amerindian.

If you've continued this far, you're probably wondering, well, why is Creole called Creole and what's the difference between Creole and dialects of French.

Creole differs solely from French spoken in Louisiana by its grammar. I can provide lessons in other posts.

Creole gets its name from the portuguese who popularized the term during colonization, crioulo, which comes from the latin word 'creare' meaning "to create" and thus was used to describe the language CREATED in the colony, and therefore native to the colony, hence Créole.

Want to hear what these sound like? These are .ram, .mp3 and .wav files which can be heard in RealPlayer and Windows Media Player. Let me know you if you'd like transcriptions of these clips.

Creole (Saint-Martin Parish):

[www.tulane.edu/~klingler/411/Mary\\_Dugas.ram](http://www.tulane.edu/~klingler/411/Mary_Dugas.ram)

Creole (Natchitoches Parish):

<http://caneriver.tulane.edu/mamalairworks infield.html>

Creole (Pointe-Coupée/Ascension Parishes):

[http://www.tulane.edu/~klingler/Louisiana\\_French\\_Mp3/Father\\_Rodney.mp3](http://www.tulane.edu/~klingler/Louisiana_French_Mp3/Father_Rodney.mp3)

Colonial/Plantation French (Avoyelles Parish): [www.tulane.edu/~klingler/411/Boucherie.ram](http://www.tulane.edu/~klingler/411/Boucherie.ram)

Colonial/Plantation French (Acadia Parish):

[www.tulane.edu/~klingler/411/Ruby\\_Henderson.ram](http://www.tulane.edu/~klingler/411/Ruby_Henderson.ram)

Colonial/Plantation French (Lafayette Parish):

[http://www.tulane.edu/~klingler/Louisiana\\_French\\_Mp3/Rogers\\_Bernard.mp3](http://www.tulane.edu/~klingler/Louisiana_French_Mp3/Rogers_Bernard.mp3)

Cajun French (Lafayette Parish):  
<http://www.codofil.org/mp3s/felixrichard.mp3>

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#### LANGUAGES AND LABELS

as found on the web at <http://caneriver.tulane.edu/LanguagesLabels.html>

Linguists have traditionally recognized three French-related speech varieties in Louisiana. Different names have been given to these varieties, but they will here be referred to as Louisiana Creole, Louisiana Regional French, and Plantation Society French.

#### Plantation Society French

Plantation Society French, which was widely spoken in Louisiana until the late nineteenth century but has now virtually disappeared, resembles Referential French in its grammatical structure, though it may differ from it in pronunciation and in the use of some words. The name 'Plantation Society French,' which was first proposed by Michael Picone (Picone 1998), highlights the crucial role that Louisiana's plantation economy played in maintaining this variety in the region. The wealth created by the plantation economy attracted continued immigration to Louisiana from France and other French-speaking regions (especially the former French colony of St. Domingue, re-baptized Haiti after the slave revolution there) and allowed Louisiana families of French origin to maintain contact with their ancestral home and to provide a French-language education for their children, either by sending them to private schools in Louisiana or by sending them to France to be educated. It was these strong and enduring ties with France and other parts of the Francophone world that contributed to a flourishing of French-language journalism, literature, theater, and opera in nineteenth-century Louisiana.

#### Louisiana Regional French

We use 'Louisiana Regional French' to encompass a range of varieties spoken throughout Francophone Louisiana that are more distinct from Referential French than is Plantation Society French, but that share a great many features with regional and informal varieties of French spoken in France and elsewhere in the Francophone world. What we call 'Louisiana Regional French' is often referred to elsewhere as 'Cajun French' (see [Why Louisiana Regional French?](#)). It is spoken by members of several ethnic groups, including African Americans, Creoles of color, whites, and some Native Americans.

#### Louisiana Creole

Louisiana Creole is further removed from Referential French in structure than is Louisiana Regional French, and it shares a great many features with the other French-based creole languages of the world. Although it was once widely spoken in the plantation areas along the state's major waterways, Louisiana Creole is now restricted to a few zones. The largest of these lies along the Bayou Teche in lower St. Landry Parish and St. Martin Parish, but the language is also still spoken in the parishes of St. Tammany, St. James, St. John, and Pointe Coupee. While traditionally associated with African Americans and Creoles of color, Louisiana Creole is also spoken by many whites.

#### Referential French

Referential French denotes the type of French that is described in major reference works such as dictionaries and grammars. It generally serves as the standard for use in formal contexts and in writing.

#### 'Cajun,' 'Creole,' 'French.' What's in a name?

We have just seen that there are three main types of French spoken in Louisiana. But the labels we have applied to them—'Plantation Society of French,' 'Louisiana Regional French,' and 'Louisiana Creole'—are not those used by Louisiana Francophones themselves. Some of the most common language labels heard in Louisiana include 'Cajun,' 'Creole,' and 'French.' Yet the specific types of French to which these labels refer vary according to the speaker and the context. 'French' tends to be used in a general way to refer to any type of French, as long as the context does not call for any further specification. When Louisiana Francophones want to distinguish their spoken French from Referential French or from the French spoken elsewhere, they typically make use of other labels, such as 'Cajun,' 'Creole,' or even 'broken French.' This last label reflects the unfortunate, but widespread feeling that the French spoken in Louisiana is somehow defective and is not 'good' or 'real' French.

But in order to understand the different ways in which the labels 'Cajun' and 'Creole' are used, it is first necessary to understand that there is a strong link between language labels and ethnic labels in Louisiana, such that people often use identical terms to refer to themselves and to the language that they speak. Thus, people who identify themselves as 'Cajun' very often call their French 'Cajun,' as well, even though in some cases it may be something that is linguistically closer to what we call Louisiana Creole. By the same token, Francophones who consider themselves Creoles typically also apply the label 'Creole' to the type of French they speak, regardless of whether it is, from a linguistic point of view, Louisiana Creole or Louisiana Regional French. In western St. Landry Parish, for example, self-identified Cajuns and Creoles speak the same kind of French—the variety that we refer to as Louisiana Regional French—but the Cajuns typically call it 'Cajun' and the Creoles typically call it 'Creole.' Something like the converse situation exists in Pointe Coupee Parish, where Louisiana Creole is the only French-related variety still spoken today. It is spoken by both blacks and whites, and while the most common label for the language is 'Creole,' many whites who consider themselves Cajuns also refer to their type of French as 'Cajun.'

## Why 'Louisiana Regional French'?

It is because of this strong link between ethnic labels and language labels that we prefer to use the ethnically neutral term 'Louisiana Regional French' to refer to the variety—or group of varieties—that is often called 'Cajun French' in writings about French in Louisiana. As an ethnic label, 'Cajun' is usually used only in reference to whites. Yet, as we have seen, Louisiana Regional French is also spoken by many African Americans and Creoles of color, as well as by some Native Americans, who do not consider themselves Cajuns. It seems inappropriate to use such an ethnically specific label to refer to a speech variety that is widely spoken by people who do not identify themselves as members of that ethnic group. Indeed, some non-Cajun speakers of Louisiana Regional French vehemently object to their speech being labeled as Cajun.

A legitimate argument could be made that, for similar reasons, the label 'Louisiana Creole' should also be replaced with a neutral alternative. After all, the term 'Creole' is also closely associated with an ethnic group that does not encompass all of those who actually speak that variety. While this is true, we choose to retain the label for two reasons. First, it usefully underlines this variety's many similarities to the other French-based creole languages of the world that are commonly referred to by that label (e.g., Haitian Creole, Martinican Creole, Mauritian Creole, etc.). Second, while it is true that the term 'Creole' as an ethnic label in Louisiana today most often refers to people of African descent or of mixed race, it has historically been used—and in some part of Louisiana still is—to refer to white people, as well.

### References:

- Klingler, Thomas A. 2003. *If I Could Turn My Tongue Like That: The Creole Language of Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana*. Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.
- Picone, Michael D. 1998. Historic French diglossia in Louisiana. Paper read at the 58th Annual Meeting of the Southeastern Conference on Linguistics, at the University of Southwestern Louisiana, Lafayette, Louisiana, 26-28 March.

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Addendum: Notes by Sheldon L. Roy 30-August-2011

\***Créole** is a controversial term with several different meanings, the most common of which follow. Creoles are:

1. the wealthy French nobility in Colonial Louisiana (New Orleans and environs) before American statehood in 1803
2. the children born of immigrants in Colonial Louisiana, as distinct from their parents, who were born in France (or Spain, Germany)
3. Colonial inhabitants who are of mixed heritage, e.g., French and Spanish or German
4. Colonial inhabitants who are of mixed races, e.g., a combination of two or more of these: white (French, Spanish, German), Black (African, Haitian, Dominican, West Indies), Native American Indian
5. Free People of Color: Blacks and mulattos who were set free by their French Colonial owners (often cohabitants), who owned their own property and who owned slaves themselves. The most amazing example today of a community of the descendants of the Free People of Color is found in Cane River, Louisiana, just south of Natchitoches. They are traditionally French speaking, Catholic and a beautiful mixture of African and French races. They have managed to be very homogeneous in preserving their culture and community. In earlier years, they were very guarded about marrying outsiders – they would not marry blacks, nor would they marry whites. Today, like in most other cultures, these barriers are falling and they are beginning to become more heterogeneous, which has both fortunate and unfortunate consequences.
6. descendants of any of the above, even after statehood, until this day. The distinct French three-tier social structure in Colonial Louisiana—the whites (French/Spanish/German), the Creoles (mixed race – mulattos, and the blacks (slaves)—gradually disappeared with the influx of American settlers from the outside Louisiana.

*\*This is why we have to be careful when we use the term "Creole," even if it's used with great pride among these different groups.*

Side Note: Oddly, to this day, old timers in Avoyelles, when speaking French, still refer to non-Frenchmen as "les Américains" (the Americans), which is really funny, as they themselves are certainly American, but the meaning is entirely cultural, not political. For example, if a young doctor from Knoxville, TN were assigned to Marksville to do his residency at the local hospital and, once arrived and settled, having been confronted with local culture and somewhat confused by it, might be jokingly referred to as an American: "Ça c'est un Américain" – "that's an American for you," not understanding the ways of French colonial culture, such as knocking decorated eggs on Easter Sunday on the courthouse square after Easter morning High Mass, or not understanding how to cook a crawfish étouffée, or whatever. We're all American now, since 1803, but strangely enough, this vestige of Colonial French Louisiana is still preserved.

The French in Avoyelles is a somewhat standard French, although archaic, which would be something analogous to Shakespearean English in the English language. For example, in Avoyelles, it is very common to say "C'est valliant temps dihors" for the phrase, "it's nice weather outside." But who would say, "What valiant weather it is today!" We just don't talk like that anymore, but the Avoyelleans do so in the French, because it is a 18th-19th century French. Unfortunately, our generation has lost it for the most part. ☹