

La bibliothèque n’a pas détruit le français (mais elle va le faire revivre):

Roles for Louisiana’s Academic Libraries in French Revitalization

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Abstract

Amidst the state government's multi-pronged effort to preserve and develop the French language in Louisiana, libraries and library services are notable by their absence. The Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) operates no programs based in or on libraries, lists no libraries among its consortial partners, and doesn't even provide a clear option for nominating libraries as “French Friendly” locations. This paper offers proposals for expanding the role of Louisiana’s academic libraries in French revitalization efforts, highlighting ways in which they can fill longstanding gaps in CODOFIL's school-centered programs. This will facilitate a broader spectrum of language use across the lifespan of French learners, a greater engagement with minority communities in the opportunities afforded by French, and a deeper appreciation for the French language “as found in Louisiana.”

Keywords: academic libraries; language policy; language preservation; language revitalization; Louisiana French; CODOFIL; bilingual librarianship; French in North America

When the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) was established in 1968, its mission was conceived around K–12 schools. Its creator, James Domengeaux, had lived through the repression of French in the Louisiana school system during the first half of the twentieth century and was fond of saying that “*L’école a détruit le français, l’école va le faire revivre*” (the school destroyed French; the school will make it live again). His years of tireless activism saw anti-French policy thoroughly enough reversed to establish the only state-level agency in the US dedicated to minority language preservation, empowered by law to “do any and all things necessary to accomplish the development, utilization, and preservation of the French language ... for the cultural, economic, and tourist benefit of the State.”

The decisions CODOFIL has made over the last fifty years in its efforts to fulfil that mandate have not been without controversy, and it has faced many and varied criticisms over its systemic preference for Metropolitan over Cajun French, its teacher recruitment policies, and many other aspects of its programs. It is beyond the scope of this article to address the full range of these critiques, many of which are valid within their own spheres. For present purposes, it will be assumed that CODOFIL’s mission as formulated broadly represents a legitimate public interest of the State of Louisiana and that its efforts, while arguably flawed and hitherto insufficient, nonetheless represent a positive direction to be refined and supplemented, rather than an overturned whole.

Among the most glaring omissions in CODOFIL’s approach to doing “any and all things necessary”, however, is its general failure to engage educational and cultural heritage institutions outside the K–12 school system. Libraries, in particular, are notable by their absence. The Council operates no programs based in or on libraries, lists no

libraries among its consortial partners, and doesn't even provide a clear option for nominating libraries to its directory of "French Friendly" locations around the state. The invisibility of libraries as part of language revitalization efforts is not unique to Louisiana by any means (Makanani, 2011, p. 33), but it is as detrimental there as anywhere else.

Libraries of all kinds can and must play a vital role in an holistic language policy for the state. The contributions of public, school, and special libraries, however, fall outside the scope of this paper, which aims to present roles for academic libraries in supporting the aims that CODOFIL was created to serve, and thereby to offer strategies for libraries to center themselves in French-language efforts in Louisiana and demonstrate their value to stakeholders in that process.

French in the Academic Library Today

Louisiana's universities are world-leading centers for the academic study of French language, literature, and linguistics. Louisiana State University (LSU)'s Center for French and Francophone Studies is one of only fifteen programs in the United States designated by the French Embassy as a *centre d'excellence* (LSU, 2018c), and all of the major higher educational institutions in the state offer undergraduate and graduate programs with active research agendas and diverse study abroad options. Louisiana draws students from every corner of the world, including the *francophonie* itself, to study French.

Louisiana's academic libraries have hitherto supported this primarily by the maintenance of extensive and unique special collections focused on Louisiana's French history. The LSU Libraries maintain nine separate digital collections of this kind, from the Armand Duplantier Family Letters to the Maps of Louisiana Collection, to say

nothing of the extensive print and manuscript holdings. The University of Louisiana keeps a similarly impressive stock, supplemented by the Cajun & Creole Music Collection, among others. These unique collections are an invaluable support to disciplinary scholarship in French studies (as well as Louisiana history).

What is being missed at present, however, is support not for scholarship *of* French, but for scholarship *in* French. Nearly 100,000 students in Louisiana study French in school (CODOFIL, 2018b), and twenty-six immersion schools teach more than 4,500 students in French (Burgess, 2017). Many of these students arrive at in-state universities in command of one of the great languages of international scholarship, but only a fraction of these will be entering programs for the study of French; a great many more will be scattered across gender studies and chemistry, music and engineering, astronomy and divinity, or law, medicine, and business. When these students go looking for library staff that can help them navigate French-language sources for their research, however, these are not easy to find.

The staff directory at the LSU Libraries gives no indication of which staff, if any, maintain proficiencies in French. There isn't even a dedicated subject specialist librarian for French, simply one for "foreign languages," whose specific languages of expertise are not listed on the website (LSU, 2018b). The situation is similar at UL Lafayette, where the website lists one "modern language" librarian and gives no indication who, if anyone, *parle français* (UL Lafayette, 2018). This issue is not limited to the State systems. The University of New Orleans has one "foreign languages" liaison librarian; nothing on her profile page indicates whether one of these languages is French, and no other staff give ready indication of being francophones (UNO, 2018). Tulane University fares somewhat

better by comparison, offering a designated collections contact for “French & Italian”, as well as two other library staff who list French on their CVs (Tulane, 2018a). These can be discovered, however, only by individually reading the twenty-seven available staff profiles and separately clicking to read each of their CV attachments.

None of these libraries’ web sites appears to offer a research guide specific to locating or using French-language resources, apart from guides written for French language and literature as an academic subject. Tulane’s Howard-Tilton Memorial Library’s research guide for French (Tulane, 2018b) happens to include French databases covering humanities and social sciences in general, but this information is not included in the research guides for those subjects and so would only be likely to be found by students in the French program. In a random sampling of several dozen research guides across all four libraries, only one was found to include a French-language resource in a discipline outside French language, literature, and linguistics; this was the research guide for Religious Studies at Tulane (2018c).

In 1988, the folklorist Barry Ancelet summed up CODOFIL’s efforts by saying that “the experiment to revive French remained theoretical. It had not yet made the trip home from school” (p. 351). Thirty years later, in Louisiana’s academic libraries, French still isn’t making the trip *to school* from school. The loss this represents runs much deeper than missed opportunities for reading practice or points off essays for an insufficient number of sources. It nullifies the entire rationale of the K–12 French programs insofar as they aim “to establish Louisiana as a francophone community” (Haskins, 2015, pp. 37–8) and to insert Louisiana’s francophone population, Cajun and otherwise, “dans l’ensemble linguistique et culturel constitué par la francophonie ... qui

leur permette ouverture et inscription dans le monde contemporain” (“into the linguistic and cultural fold constituted by the francophonie ... which permits opening and inscription into the contemporary world”) (Atran-Fresco, 2014, p. 1).

In a study addressing the information needs of L2 English speakers at American university libraries, Albarillo (2018) observed that non-native speakers schooled in the United States frequently preferred English-language resources, owing to their development of asymmetrical literacies for domain-specific reading. Among others, he reported the experience of a student from Colombia who “is obviously a fluent Spanish speaker and reader, but [went to university in the United States and] knows her academic discipline in English only so she cannot readily code-switch to Spanish for academic tasks” (p. 637). Albarillo (2018) noted that these students would not be able to successfully port the benefits of their studies in the United States back to their home countries for job prospects, graduate school, or other purposes if they only acquire academic language in English and are not supported in developing parallel skills in their native language (p. 640). Similarly, Louisiana’s French immersion graduates will not be able to fulfill the promise of their K–12 French programs in opening doors to advanced study or work prospects in the francophonie if their higher education experiences in Louisiana do not actively support the development of academic, technical, and professional literacies *in* French outside the context of the academic study *of* French—a need that seems, at present, to be going largely unmet.

French in the Academic Library Tomorrow

Providing the support that graduates of the CODOFIL-led K–12 programs will need to truly leverage their French ability will require changes to the way Louisiana’s academic libraries do business in collections management, serials acquisition, digital materials licensing, reference services, and a host of other areas. The most essential changes and the easiest to implement in the beginning, however, are the same proposals made by Albarillo (2018) for supporting L2 English students. Speaking of the Colombian student mentioned previously, he noted that “she spoke about wanting to gain some experience working in Colombia; however, she lacked the Spanish academic vocabulary to be competitive. To help students like her, academic librarians could create LibGuides for non-English scholarly sources” (Albarillo, 2018, p. 641). While Albarillo envisioned supplemental guides for particular languages, in the Louisiana context it would be desirable to integrate French-language resources directly into existing subject-area research guides in order to recast French in the student’s mind from being one subject among others to being a professional skill applicable across all subject domains.

Such an approach is supported by collections policies already in place, but requires a shift in the framework of thinking about how those collections support student needs. For many foreign students attending American universities all that is required is access to materials in their native language, which extensive databases such as EBSCO already provide. The full and skillful use of non-English materials held in such databases, however, depends on an academic acculturation that occurs naturally for students in French-speaking universities, but which L2 French speakers from Louisiana schools do not commonly receive. In scholarly literature no less than in the realm of poetry or fiction, every linguistic community has its prestige journals and its classic monographs

that every person educated in that particular domain is expected to know and to engage in their own work. The knowledge of these comes partly from extensive reading and partly from mentorship by established practitioners, but the osmotic acquisition of these touchstone works and publications that occurs for students in French-speaking countries does not generally occur for American students, whose mentors often do not know French and engage with only the subset of francophone discourse in their field that enters English translation. This puts students interested in pursuing graduate studies or high-level professional opportunities in the *francophonie*, or even just in close collaboration with its inhabitants, at a significant disadvantage.

On an even more basic level, L2 speakers are handicapped by a diminished awareness of resources and a lack of familiarity with search strategies in the target language (Kralisch & Berendt, 2005; Greenberg & Bar-Ilan, 2014). CODOFIL's guidance for the planning and establishment of immersion programs suggests that "A curriculum should be selected, adhering as closely as possible to the school system's regular curriculum. This may necessitate translation of existing materials" (CODOFIL, "French Immersion", p. 17), and provides for only 30% of the instructional day to be conducted in French at the high school level, consisting of French class itself plus one core subject (p. 7). Thus even those students who arrive at Louisiana's universities with the most intensive levels of French preparation have generally been following American, rather than French, curricula and have only very seldom engaged with French-language resources in the specific subject area of their major. Such students are doubly-hampered by a lack of awareness of the materials available to them through French (many assuming that all basic information, if not all actual materials, are available in English in much the

same way that “everything is on the Internet”). They also experience a lack of familiarity with French-language search strategies for rephrasing queries, selecting broader and narrower terms amidst discipline-specific vocabularies, etc. Under such conditions, a specific commitment to highlighting individual resources—most especially those journals or current monographs that students at French-language universities would be naturally exposed to in the course of their academic mentorship—can have a large impact in promoting continued use of the language and college and career readiness beyond the bachelor’s or master’s level.

In short, the unique conditions of Louisiana’s French revival initiatives and the uncommonly ambitious objectives they set not merely for students to attain skill in two languages, but to attain membership in two (or more) cultures through Louisiana’s integration into the *francophonie*, deepens the job of facilitating access to library resources. In some measure, the subject specialist librarian is called upon to supplement the mentorship students receive from instructional faculty in order to supply the French-specific portion of acculturation in the student’s discipline that would, in the French-speaking world, occur naturally in consultation with instructors. Seen in that perspective, a level of granularity and annotation in curating and presenting resources in French rather greater than that typically applied to English-language resources is both necessary and desirable.

Albarillo (2018) also suggested that “[l]ibraries could focus on hiring multilingual librarians” (p. 641), which is obviously necessary for the implementation of the previous recommendation. This, of course, is easier said than done, but distinctive solutions and distinctive benefits arise in the context of Louisiana’s statewide effort at French revival.

Louisiana is home to one ALA-accredited master's program in library science, housed at LSU. The program offers several specializations (including academic librarianship), but none offer a specific focus on bilingual librarianship, nor do course offerings support electives in this area. Similarly, there is a dual-degree option with the University's history department "to prepare archivists" (LSU, 2018a), but no official collaboration for a dual-degree, or even certificate, option with French. This is a tremendous missed opportunity on three fronts:

- 1) It is a missed opportunity for Louisiana's libraries and library patrons (academic and otherwise), who require library staff with knowledge of French-language resources and the ability to serve francophone patrons.
- 2) It is a missed opportunity for Louisiana's Cajun population and for Louisiana French. One of the chief criticisms of CODOFIL's initiatives has always been that they depended on teachers from France, Belgium, and Canada and did not do enough to support native Cajun language and culture. A great deal of work has been put into correcting this imbalance and a majority of CODOFIL's teachers are now native Louisianans (Ducote, 2017). Nonetheless, K-12 teacher positions will, of necessity, appeal only to a certain segment of the population and, as present teacher shortages suggest, these positions are becoming less attractive for young people entering the workforce. Promoting librarianship as a means for Cajun-speakers to share their language and culture opens new avenues of participation in CODOFIL's wider mandate and offers the opportunity to engage a wider swath of the Cajun population in linguistic and cultural heritage work.

- 3) It is a missed opportunity for LSU's library science program which, in partnering with the French Department to offer dedicated options for preparation in bilingual librarianship, could craft an offering unique in North America. Given that LSU's library science master's degree is already attainable entirely through distance education, this could prove an especially attractive option for students from all over the francophone world looking to show employers bilingual ability with English collections and services. This is particularly true for library science students in Quebec, whose job prospects depend on both bilingual proficiency in English and ALA-accreditation, but who are currently served by only two library science programs (McGill University and the Université de Montréal) that both require on-campus attendance in Montréal, and neither of which offer a focus on bilingual librarianship.

In the Louisiana context, then, a focus on hiring multilingual librarians should not only include prioritization of candidates with French-language skills in new hiring and professional development opportunities for existing librarians to cultivate skills in French. It should also include a higher-level effort to create pathways through LSU's program that will promote recruitment of native Louisiana French speakers into librarianship and offer training specific to supporting bilingual library services and collections.

Conclusion

For Louisiana's French revitalization efforts to succeed, a much broader range of educational, cultural, and heritage institutions will need to be engaged. Academic libraries are not unique in having been underleveraged, but their absence from the State's

language policy is arguably uniquely detrimental, owing to the capstone role they play in activating not only the academic, but also the business potential of the skills that existing programs work hard to impart to Louisiana's students.

An expanded role in French revitalization for Louisiana's academic libraries will benefit the language and the communities that speak it. It will also benefit the academic institutions in which these libraries are housed—most simply by promoting access to cutting-edge research in the French-speaking world and facilitating partnerships between individual researchers and institutions, but also by paving the way for the development of new programs and curricular offerings that emphasize bilingual skills and can be marketed both domestically and abroad wherever the English and French languages come into close daily contact, as in Canada, the Caribbean, or much of West Africa.

The Louisiana library does not bear the moral burden in respect of French that is borne by Louisiana's schools and which James Domengeaux worked so hard to expiate. It does, however, have just as important a role to play in the French revival, and every bit as much to gain from it.

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