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KOURI-VINI

A Guide to Louisiana Creole Orthography

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Introduction

Due to a number of complex historical factors, the Louisiana Creole language declined after 1900. The 20th century interwar period only served to marginalize and discourage the use of the language even further. Many languages, like French spoken in Missouri, Mississippi, and Alabama, did not weather the storm.

But Louisiana Creole did. Today, there are hundreds of people all over the world with a desire to learn Louisiana Creole, and many are doing just that everyday. Social media, especially Facebook, has been a powerfully unifying and instructive social tool to inform and engage the public on matters pertaining to the language. Zydeco music fame has helped to popularize and revalorize the language, but its newfound prestige and community value stem from community members leading the movement for greater Louisiana Creole language recognition and learning, and a recent ISO 639 name change from "Louisiana Creole French" to Louisiana Creole.

The contributors of this guide hope to see the language grow rather than decline further. So, we have come together to produce this useful orthography guide for the language. It is not the first, but it will be the first designed specifically for the masses, by Louisianians familiar with the historical and cultural context of the language. We have revisited previous orthographies used to convey Louisiana Creole, and while well-meaning and useful in academic contexts, we found them inadequate. Consequently, we have abandoned use of French, English, and Haitian orthographies all together to

craft a writing system that is both familiar and accessible to Americanized Louisiana Creoles. Since community learning has been our objective, it was important for us to consider symbols and sounds with which Louisianians are familiar, and we have used this as our guiding light. Now, Louisiana Creolophones have an orthography which they can proudly claim is uniquely theirs.

We therefore seek to standardize the orthography presented in this guide, which is already in common use. Contributors and consultants on the guide already make use of this orthography, whether in academic publications or on social media. Additionally, the recently launched–and much appreciated–Louisiana Creole Dictionary online also uses this same orthography.

The same patchwork of factors contributing to Louisiana Creole's decline has also contributed to complexities in taxonomies for the language in English. Race (imposed), ethnic identity (self-ascribed), and the name of the language one speaks, are all intricately interwoven in Louisiana and its diasporic communities. Unlike in other regions of the world, for Louisianians, one's racial identity tends to inform one's ethnic identity, both of which determine how one identifies the Louisiana heritage language spoken. Thus, although the language transcends racialized identities, white-identified Louisianians most often self-identify today as Cajun and equally identify the language they speak as "Cajun French" (i.e. Louisiana French). Similarly, black- and mixed-identified Louisianians self-identify mostly as Louisiana Creole and identify the language as "Creole French" or "French Creole." In reality, many of those white Louisianians are Creolophones, while many of their black and mixed brethren speak Louisiana French.

This has greatly complicated accurate estimations of the number of speakers of Louisiana Creole that remain today. Linguists Ingrid Neumann-Holzschuh and Thomas A. Klingler estimate that fewer than 10,000 speakers exist. They are probably closest to the mark on that figure. Since 1900, wars and industry have reconstituted Louisiana Creolophone communities, and have been cause for out-migrations by the thousands to neighboring Texas, as well as to California, Illinois, and Georgia. Today, it is common to hear Louisiana Creole spoken naturally on Bayou Têche and in some civil parishes along the Mississippi River above New Orleans. Thanks to technologies and genuine interest, more speakers are appearing throughout the nation and world.[i]

Alphabet and Accent Marks

The Louisiana Creole alphabet has 23 consonants, 13 vowels. They are represented below in upper- and lower-case.

Aa, Ææ, Bb, Çç, Ch, Dd, Dj, Ee, Éé, Èè, Ff, Gg, Hh, Ii, Ìì, Jj, Kk, Ll, Mm, Nn, Ññ, Oo, Òò, Œœ, Ou, Pp, Rr, Ss, Sh, Tt, Uu, Vv, Ww, Yy, Zz.

2.1 Alphabet

2.1.1 Vowels

The following chart presents the Louisiana Creole vowels, their graphemes, and approximations in English. Some words–especially those containing [æ], [ø], [œ], [u], and [y]–have alternative pronunciations; in these cases both spellings are acceptable. For example: *lær* vs. *lèr* ('hour'); *astè* vs. *astær* ("now").

Phoneme	Grapheme	Approximations in English
[ɑ], [a][ii]	a	British: bath, pass, tomato
[æ]	æ	bat, plaid, black
[ø]	e	butter, cut, shut, lettuce
[e]	é	pace, bake
[ɛ]	è	pet, set
[i]	i	bleed, sheet, sleet
[ɪ]	ì	miss, kiss
[o]	o	coat, boat, most
[ɔ]	ò	bought, sought
[œ]	œ	n/a
[u]	ou	boot, loop
[y]	u	pewter, stew, mutilate

For diphthongs, where the second vowel is I ([i]), it is spelled with the consonant Y ([j]).

2.1.1.1 Nasal vowels

Louisiana Creole has a set of vowels which are produced by letting air flow out of the nose rather than the mouth. These "nasal vowels" are written as the vowel followed by the consonants N (/n/) or M (/m/). These letters are not pronounced, but signal the nasalization of the vowel. The choice of /m/ or /n/ depends on the etymology of the word, making it easier for learners to relate the Creole word to its French relative, with which they may be familiar.

Phoneme	Grapheme	Examples in Creole
[ɑ̃]	an, am	endan ("inside")
	en, em	tem ("time")
[ɛ̃]	in, im	shagrin ("sorry") fim ("hungry")
[ɔ̃]	on, om	mouton ("sheep") bomb ("bomb")
[œ̃]	un, um	lundi ("Monday")

2.1.1.2 Nasal vowels followed by /n/ and /m/

Because N and M are not pronounced where they are used to indicate nasal vowels, it is necessary to have special spellings for cases where a nasal vowel is followed by an N or M which is pronounced.

Phoneme	Grapheme	Examples
[ɑ̃n] [ɑ̃m]	ònn, anm	banònn ("banana") Madanm ("Mrs.")
	enn, enm	tenn ("tender") fenm ("woman")
[ɛ̃n] [ɛ̃m]	ènn, inm	balènn ("whale") batinm ("baptism")
[ɔ̃n]	onn	Hyoustonn ("Houston") Karltonn ("Carlton")
[œ̃n]	unn, umm	kékunn ("someone")

2.1.1.3 Oral vowels followed by /n/ and /m/

Similarly, there are some cases where a vowel is not nasal (i.e. it is "oral") but is followed by the sound /n/ or /m/. To avoid confusion with nasal vowels, these sound combinations also have their own special spelling. Therefore, both *banann* and *banònn* are accepted pronunciations and spellings for "banana."

Phoneme	Grapheme	Examples in Creole	Approximations in English
[an] [am]	ann, amm	Madamm ("Mrs.") bananн ("banana")	British A: tomato
[in]	inn, imm	mashinn ("machine") Karimm (name)	bean team
[ɪn]	ìnn	Katrìnn (name) Maksìmm (name)	kin

2.1.2 Consonants

The following chart presents the Louisiana Creole consonants, their graphemes, approximations in English, and vocal feature.

Phoneme	Grapheme	Approximations in English	Examples in Creole
[b]	b	best	bébé ("baby")
[s]	ç	center	ça ("that")
	s	sit	asi ("to sit")
[tʃ]	ch	teacher	chué ("to kill")
[d]	d	delta	dèlta
[dʒ]	dj	jam	djab ("devil")
[f]	f	fan	fiy ("girl")
[g]	g	game	gémm
[h]	h	ham	lahash ("ax")
[ʒ]	j	leisure	joué ("to play")
[k]	k	kyte	kouri ("to go")

[l]	l	lamb	lékòl (“school”)
[m]	m	mother	mamm
[n]	n	north	nòr
[ɲ][iii]	ñ	jalapeño	mañè (“way”)
[p]	p	part	popa (“dad”)
[ɾ][ɾ][ɾ/d/t] initial: [ɾ] middle 1: [ɾ] middle 2: [ɾ/d/t] final: [ɾ]	r	ladder silent	initial: rou (“roux”) middle 1: Enriyèt (name) middle 2: parlé (“to speak”) final: shar (“car”)
[ʃ]	sh	shine, mash	shvé (“hair”)
[t]	t	tender	tenn
[v]	v	van	vendé (“to sell”)
[w]	w	win	wa (“to see”)
[j]	y	yawn	yé (“they”)
[z]	z	zoo	zozo (“bird”)

2.2 Accent marks (diacritics)

Several diacritics or accent marks are employed and are classed into 4 categories: sound shifters, stress, homonymic, and the preterit tense marker.

The diacritics or accent markers are:

- acute
- grave
- circumflex

2.2.1 The acute

The acute accent, or *laksen égu*, has 2 functions.

2.2.1.1 Stress

Similar to Spanish, Louisiana Creole has stressed syllables. As a general rule, the final syllable in words–specifically words and names ending in the letter-A–are stressed. For this reason, we do not use the acute on final vowels. On all other syllables, however, which are less frequent, we do use the acute.

*The é /e/ does not follow this stressed patten and rule.

For instance, when a word with an acute is not followed by another word requiring stress, like *pa* (not; or, don't), the word retains its acute (e.g. -ç<u>á</u>la = those).

2.2.1.2 Preterit

In written Louisiana Creole, we also use the acute on the final letter in verbs (if a vowel) to visually show a completed action. This does not change the quality of the word by shifting the stress on that syllable. It is simply a visual indication for the reader that the past tense is being employed because some communities, especially those along the Mississippi River, use the infinitive in both the present and past tenses.

This becomes especially important when using the preterit in regular verbs, a class of verbs where the speaker/writer has the option of using the preterit or the present perfect. The latter requires the past tense marker *té* whereas the former does not.

Irregular verbs in the past tense necessitates the present perfect marker *té*, as the infinitive is used in the present tense of that verb class. Still here, as an added assurance for the reader, as is the case for the present perfect of regular verbs, we accentuate the final letter of the verb (only if it is a vowel) with an acute accent. Irregular verbs, therefore, only come in the present perfect form, and that form can express both the preterit and the present perfect, depending on the meaning conveyed by the speaker.

Examples

Present		Preterit
Mo sorti	vs.	Mo sortí
Mo shwazi		Mo shwazí
Mo wa		Mo wá
Mo kwi		Mo kwí

2.2.2 The grave

The grave, or *laksen grav*, is used on vowels E, I, and O as shown in section 2.1.1. It is not employed on the vowels A and U.

2.2.3 The circumflex

2.2.3.1 Homonyms

The circumflex (^) is deployed where words sound the same and are spelled the same with different meanings (homonyms). This is especially important for differentiating some subject pronouns and possessive adjectives in writing.

As a rule of thumb, the circumflex will be used on the least common of the 2 words that sound–and are written–the same.

For example: *pyé* ("foot") vs. *pyê* ("shrub," "tree," "base")

2.2.3.2 Possessive adjectives

The circumflex is also used to mark possessive pronouns. This distinguishes them from the subject pronouns, which would otherwise be written identically (e.g. *mo* "I" vs. *mô* "my").

Creole	English
mô	my
tô	your (informal)
vou	your (formal)
sô	his, her, its
nô	our
vou	your (plural), yall's
yê	their

Punctuation

Punctuation rules generally follow those of US English. These shared punctuation rules apply to, but not limited to the: period, comma, exclamation point, question mark, parenthesis, apostrophe, quotation marks (double inverted commas), second quotation marks (single inverted commas), colon, semi-colon, dashes, brackets, ellipses.

3.1 Time

Punctuation rules regarding time and climate temperatures follow those in English (colon (:) and (º)). The abbreviations of AM and PM are different, however, in that afternoon in Louisiana Creole is *laprémidi* (*lm*), evening is *swá* (*sw*) and morning is *matin* (*ma*). Their abbreviations are represented by the first two letters in lowercase.

10:00 AM	10AM	10:00 PM
10:00 ma	10 ma	10:00 sw

3.2 Abbreviations

Similarly, abbreviations for Latin and Greek terms will be shared with English. The only exception to the abbreviation rules are those for social titles in Louisiana Creole. Some examples are in the table below.

Superscripts	Ordinary abbreviation	Term	Abbreviation in English
D^{è}	Dè	Doktè	Dr.
F^{s}	Fs	fis	Jr.
J^{l}	Jl	Jénéral	Gen.
M^{é}	Mé	Mishé	Mr.
M^{m}	Mm	Madanm	Mrs.
M^{zl}	Mzl	Manmzèl	Miss
P^{sè}	Psè	Profésè	Prof.
S^{n}-	Sn-	Sin-	St.

Capitalization and Hyphenation

Capitalization and hyphenation rules in Louisiana Creole follow Latin language rules.

4.1 Upper-case First Letters

- Business names
- Countries
- Given names (first, middle, last names)
- Nationalities
- Proper names
- Street names
- Titles (social, publications, etc.)

4.2 Lower-case First Letters

- Adjectives (including in country/place names)
- Nouns (unless the first word of a sentence)

4.3 Hyphenation

Hyphenation is compulsory where two or more words or names are always uttered together but are not grouped together without spaces or hyphenations. Verbs are exempt from hyphenation.

These generally include the following groups of words:

- Animals and insects (e.g. moush-a-fé = firefly)
- Christian saint names (e.g. Sin-Jozèf)
- Countries and other place names (e.g. Léta-Zini)
- Given names (double and triple barrel forenames and surnames)
- Imperatives (e.g. dònn-mò ça = give me that)
- Numbers (cardinal and ordinary)
- Pronouns (postnominal)
- Utensils (e.g. pwal-a-fri = frying pan)

4.3.1 Demonstrative Pronouns

Demonstratives also use hyphenation, and can be either pronominal (especially plural demonstratives in southwest Louisiana) or postnominal.

4.3.1.1 Singular demonstratives

This dude	This cake	That dude	That cake
boug-çila	gato-çila	boug-çála	gato-çála

4.3.1.2 Plural demonstratives

These come in pronominal and postnominal forms. Both are acceptable and tend to be regional.

Pronominals		Postnominals	
These dudes	Those dudes	These dudes	Those dudes
çê boug	çê boug-yé çê boug-çála	boug-çilayé	boug-çalayé

Endnotes

[i] Ingrid Neumann-Holzschuh, Thomas A. Klingler. 2013. Louisiana Creole structure dataset. In: Michaelis, Susanne Maria & Maurer, Philippe & Haspelmath, Martin & Huber, Magnus (eds.) Atlas of Pidgin and Creole Language Structures Online. Leipzig: Max Planck Institute for Evolutionary Anthropology. (Available online at http://apics-online.info/contributions/53, Accessed on 2015-12-16.)

[ii] The phoneme [a] is the shorter version of [ɑ].

[iii] Where the Ñ is used, when a vowel precedes it, the vowel retains its original sound and does not nasalize with the Ñ.

Thus, liñ = [li + ñ = leeñ] and gañé = [ga + ñé].