

Preserving Louisiana French as Living Language

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Tom Klingler, an expert in linguistics and French spoken in Louisiana, receives beaucoup e-mail inquiries from people around the world who want to learn how to speak Louisiana Creole. To help meet the demand for instruction in language that isn't commonly taught, Klingler is developing an online tutorial program.



Tom Klingler, associate professor of French, is collaborating with a member of the faculty at Louisiana State University to develop online tutorials for people to learn Creole or Cajun French. (Photo by Paula Burch-Celentano)

An associate professor of French at Tulane, Klingler speaks Louisiana Creole French fluently, though has never taught others how to speak it.

“There is no textbook,” he says. “So I have to create the materials.”

With funding from a grant from the Louisiana Board of Regents, Klingler is collaborating with Amanda Lafleur at Louisiana State University, who is an expert in Cajun French.

According to Klingler, Creole and Cajun French are not simply dialects of traditional French; they differ in vocabulary and grammatical structure as well as pronunciation.

There are perhaps fewer than 200,000 people who speak these languages, says Klingler, who chairs the Tulane Department of French and Italian. In contrast, more than seven million people speak the Creole French that is spoken by Haitians. Tulane offers courses in Haitian Creole.

Klingler considers himself a preservationist, but documenting Louisiana Creole French is more than an academic interest. He says the loss of any language is a significant loss of cultural heritage.

“They should be saved because there's a demand to learn these languages,” Klingler says. “Many people of Creole background are people of color who live outside of Louisiana because of outmigration due to discrimination in the South. They want to reconnect with their Louisiana roots.”

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They remember their grandparents speaking these languages, and they want to get their heritage back.”

Developing self-paced tutorials in Creole or Cajun French is a massive task. Klingler and LaFleur are in the third year of the project. Clay McGovern and Gina Allen of Tulane's [Innovative Learning Center](#) are taking the materials produced by the professors and designing the technology for the tutorials. Part of the tutorials will be audio recordings of Louisiana natives speaking their languages, accompanied by photographs of the people who are talking. Once the tutorials go “live” they will be free to anyone who wants to learn these languages.

“I've made my career by studying Louisiana French,” Klingler says. “I feel an obligation to take what I've gathered from the Louisiana Creole community and make it available to the general public and people of Creole heritage.”

Klingler is the author of *If I Could Turn My Tongue Like That: The Creole Language of Pointe Coupee Parish, Louisiana* and coauthor of the *Dictionary of Louisiana Creole*. He has received grants and fellowships from the National Endowment for the Humanities, the American Council of Learned Societies, the French Cultural Services and the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.