

Hidden Languages of Mardi Gras Indian Chants

March 17, 2011 3:00 AM Alicia Duplessis Jasmin
aduples@tulane.edu

Mardi Gras Indian chants are believed to be influenced by various languages spoken in Louisiana through its history. In an effort to determine the interplay of languages involved, faculty member Nathalie Dajko is challenging students to immerse themselves in Mardi Gras Indian culture to search for clues.



In his brightly colored suit, a member of the White Cloud Hunters Mardi Gras Indians performs at the New Orleans Jazz & Heritage Festival on May 1, 2010. (Photo by Sally Asher)

“We are looking at a number of different languages over the semester, including American Indian languages, Mobilian Jargon, French, German, Isleño Spanish and English,” says [Dajko](#) of the students enrolled in her “Languages of Louisiana” course. “This project will require students to synthesize what we've been looking at all semester and decide which languages to examine in their analysis, and then apply

their linguistic skills.”

Dajko, a visiting assistant professor with a joint appointment in the departments of anthropology and French and Italian, has studied more than six languages but her research focuses primarily on Louisiana French. In seeking a way to learn more about the chants, she created a course that would allow students to visit homes of Mardi Gras Indians, help them sew suits, attend their rehearsals and absorb a sense of their history through conversation.

“This class was born of my desire to branch out from Louisiana French and explore the rest of Louisiana's linguistic heritage in more depth,” says Dajko. “Much of what we're covering is stuff I know backwards and forwards. I'm learning the rest with the students as we go along.”

Students have already spent time transcribing and analyzing several recordings of Mardi Gras Indian chants housed in the [Hogan Jazz Archives](#) at the Howard-Tilton Memorial Library.

On Sunday (March 20), the students and public will have a chance to hear the chants live during the biggest annual event for Mardi Gras Indians. Known locally as “Super Sunday” and held on the Sunday closest to St. Joseph's Day, the event includes a short procession and live musical entertainment. For a view of Mardi Gras Indians performing, click on this [documentary](#) by the Louisiana Endowment for the Humanities.