



Valley Traditions ► Language

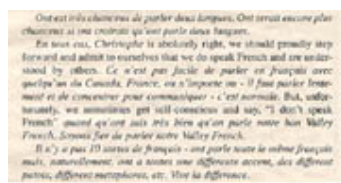
French Language



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Valley. It is heard on the street, in restaurants and stores, at public meetings, at work places, and in homes. Catholic masses are regularly delivered in French in many of the parishes like St. Agatha, St. Luce (Frenchville), and St. David (Madawaska).

The proportion of the Valley population that uses French declines when moving west from Fort Kent, up the St. John River (Rooney et al. 1982: 163). The western boundary of the Maine Acadian French speech community is near the eastern border of Allagash Plantation, Maine. As one travels east from Van Buren along the St. John River and then south along the New Brunswick border, the percentage of the population with a background in French diminishes. The change from French to English is gradual. There is, however, an abrupt decline in the use of French south from Van Buren along U.S. Route 1.



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French and English typically flow together during conversations, often in the same sentence. Dubay (1978) notes that Valley English is influenced by native French lexical and syntactic features. French speakers, as a matter of courtesy, will shift into English when a monolingual English speaker joins an exchange. Parents will occasionally shift into

French when discussing matters they don't want their children to know.

Being able to communicate effectively in both French and English is becoming highly valued in the Valley. Unilingual English speakers are clearly at a disadvantage in some types of daily speech events. For example, French speakers from New Brunswick and Québec cross over the international border into Maine in large numbers when the cost of goods is more favorable in the U.S. than in Canada. Maine

citizens working in retail establishments are at an advantage if they are able to transact business in French. Ross Paradis, a resident of the Valley speaking before the Maine Acadian Culture Preservation Commission (Sept. 1993), supports efforts to revitalize French that are tied to the economic prospects of young Maine Acadians.



The younger people do not know the hurt and the pain that went into being bilingual, they don't, and I maintain that language not be sold on the past. . . . There are jobs that require you [to] be bilingual. Driving down in the car, "Channel X" was advertising for a position in sales . . . The number one requirement was, "fluently bilingual."

French usage is declining among the population under 30 years of age. French as a mother tongue has dropped among schoolchildren in the Valley by 18% during the five-year period from 1987 to 1991 (Bérubé, 1991a). Still, a large number of young people in the Valley are receptive bilinguals; they understand the language, but some cannot speak it while others feel self-conscious about using it.

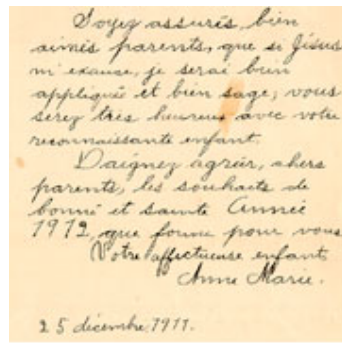
Bilingual programming was begun in Maine in 1970 and is still going on in the Valley. The Frenchville St. Agatha area school district's bilingual education program is designed to help students in both French and English. This program has made significant progress in introducing materials pertinent to the heritage and culture of the students. Fifty-five percent of the school children in the Frenchville St. Agatha area school district communicate in both French and English. Other communities reported less bilingualism, but Bérubé reports that more than half the students in Van Buren (54%) and Madawaska (52%) are able to use both languages; in all, 40% of the schoolchildren in the Upper St. John Valley speak both French and English (1991a).



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Residents have seen a decline in the overall use of French in the Valley and perceive a rapid decline in recent years. Results from recent studies are inconclusive. In 1970, Frenchville's population of French speakers was reported at 85.9% and that of St. Agatha was 96.5% (Giguère, 1979: 156). The number of French speakers remained high in the 1990 census (in spite of the fact that mother-tongue French speakers were counted in 1970, while in 1990 people who used French at home were counted). The average percentage of French speakers in Fort Kent, Madawaska, and Van Buren was 88% (M. Giguère, pers. comm. 1993). A 1991 survey in the school district that serves the Frenchville St. Agatha region found that French was used at home by 69% of the school-age children (Bérubé, 1991).

Language stigma and a desire by some to speak English are frequently cited reasons for the decline in the use of French. One Fort Kent woman in her early 30s echoes the sentiment of Valley residents who frequently report negative experiences associated with the prohibition on French in public schools. She refuses to teach her children her own native language because she was embarrassed about her speech in school; she wants to make certain her children do not develop a French accent.



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French education, once provided by one or another of the Catholic religious orders, dissolved with the institution of mandatory public education. French was forbidden in the classrooms of Maine by the time of World War I, except as a "foreign" language. Teachers, often themselves native French speakers, were required to punish children who spoke French at school. Guy Dubay (1978: 13) reports that he was made to stay after school and write hundreds of lines of "I will not speak French at school." In high school, students who spoke the

Valley variety of French were ridiculed by teachers of "standard" French because of their accents, choice of words, or syntax. Until 1960, state law required that English be the only language used for teaching school subjects in the public schools of Maine (Bélanger-Violette, 1973: 131). A number of residents claim that speaking French is still forbidden, or at least strongly discouraged in some Valley schools.

The only in-depth study of French language in the Upper St. John Valley was conducted by Geneviève Massignon, a respected professional linguist. In 1946 she initiated an extensive study of Acadian French, beginning with fieldwork in Madawaska, Maine, and Sainte-Anne-de-Madawaska, New Brunswick. Over the next year she systematically collected and compared French speech from Acadian communities in the Canadian Maritimes and Québec. In 1962, her research on Acadian speech was published in a two-volume work entitled *Les parlers français d'Acadie—Enquête linguistique*.



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Massignon concluded that the French of the Upper St. John Valley (Maine and New Brunswick) was a mixed, relatively Canadianized speech in comparison to that of surrounding Acadian settlement areas. Massignon found most Maritimes Acadian communities to be "purely Acadian" in their origins and their present-day speechways. The St. John Valley, by contrast, she found to be a mixed zone (half Acadian, half French-Canadian),

where speechways reflected a blend of Acadian and French-Canadian vocabulary and phonetics, and a predominantly French-Canadian morphology (Massignon 1962).

Opinions vary about the uniqueness of the variety of French spoken in the Valley. French teacher Marie Anne Gauvin (1969) argues that "Valley French" is unique. She and local resident Julie Albert (1969) noted many instances of maritime and nautical terms, many of which are shared throughout French Canada. There are also suggestions that because of the importance of potato farming in the region, many terms currently being used for potatoes and related activities are unique to the Valley—see "Patates à Barnard" (NADCBCE 1979). Yves Cormier of Centre de littérature, Université Sainte-Anne (Nova Scotia) suggests that "Valley French" preserves some elements of an older form of French no longer spoken elsewhere (pers. comm. 1993).

Ronald Labelle of Centre d'études acadiennes, Université de Moncton (New Brunswick) however, disagrees. He writes: "The French spoken on both sides of the St. John Valley is characteristic of that spoken in rural areas of eastern Québec. Some expressions typical of the Acadian districts of New Brunswick (the eastern half of the province) are found there, but general proximity to Québec and the influx of settlers from Lower Canada in the later 18th and early 19th centuries has resulted in a spoken language which has no significant differences to that of the St. Lawrence region of the province. . . . The only identifying aspect of the French spoken in the St. John Valley is the accent" (pers. comm. 1993).

"Les Patates à Barnard" —Nos ancêtres mangeaient des patates trois fois par jour, bouillies, pilées, frites, au four. Un célibataire nommé «Barnard» avait l'habitude de faire bouillir une quantité de patates au début de la semaine. Tous les soirs, il faisait frire des tranches de patates dans la graisse de grillage avec des oignons tranchés, et les mangeait avec des grillades de lard. Le nom est devenu célèbre chez nous, et encore aujourd'hui, lorsqu'on fait cuire des patates dans la graisse, on appelle cela «des patates à Barnard.» (Cyr, 1979:290).

Translation: "Barnard's Potatoes" —Our ancestors ate potatoes three times a day: boiled, mashed, fried, or baked. A bachelor called "Barnard" usually boiled many potatoes at the beginning of the week. Every night he fried slices of potatoes in the grease of the griddle with slices of onion, and he ate them with fried pork rinds. His name has become famous among us, and even today, when we cook potatoes in grease, we say that they are "Barnard's potatoes."



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