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Racial segregation and language variation in Louisiana Creole: Social meaning in language loss

<https://doi.org/10.1515/soci-2023-0006>

Abstract: This paper investigates how and whether speakers of endangered languages employ variation as a stylistic resource to make social meaning and index their identities. The study is set in historically Creole-speaking communities in rural Louisiana, which have now shifted almost completely to English. The Americanization of Louisiana induced language shift, but also a shift to the Anglo-American racial binary which supplanted local constructs of ethnicity and race. The study crafts a historical-sociolinguistic account of this process of Americanization, examining how linguistic differentiation was enacted through the enregisterment of iconic ‘Creole’/‘French’ variants as indexical links to the ‘Black’/‘White’ racial binary. Today, to a very limited extent, some speakers of Louisiana Creole still consider some variants socially meaningful and employ them to stylistic ends. This depends especially on racial identity and the variant in question. Subject pronouns retain some indexical value, occasionally employed stylistically by speakers racialized as White. However, front vowel rounding has *fossilized*: highly meaningful in the early-20th century, its social meaning has been lost resulting in synchronic personal-pattern variation. The paper ends by trying to reconcile classic studies of Language Death with contemporary variationist critique, answering recent calls for more nuanced approaches to sociolinguistic variation in threatened languages.

Keywords: language variation and change, race, social meaning, Louisiana Creole, language endangerment

1 Introduction

Sociolinguistic work in small communities has, since the groundbreaking work of Nancy Dorian (1977), contended with the tension between variation at the level of the individual versus that at the level of the speech community. Part of Dorian’s

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contribution to the theory of variation and change has been her attention to the idiosyncratic details of language use. Her work on speakers of East Sutherland Gaelic proposed that some variable use of linguistic forms was purely idiosyncratic, without social meaning, and could be understood as socially neutral personal-pattern variation (Dorian 1994b). The notion of variation gone “haywire” (Cook 1989: 235) through the possible loss of social weighting formed a touchstone in the studies of Language Death which emerged in the wake Dorian’s work (see, e.g., Tsitsipis 1981; Cook 1989; King 1989; Lipski 1990; Dressler 1991; Mougeon and Beniak 1991; Sasse 1992; Holloway 1997; Jones 1998).

These findings, at least at first, appeared to challenge the orthodox view of structured heterogeneity in synchronic and diachronic variation as in Weinreich et al. (1968). Subsequent work by Schilling-Estes and Wolfram (1999) presented evidence for the persistence of stylistic options in dialect death and, in a review of the topic, Wolfram (2004: 780) concludes that “the variability typifying obsolescing forms is [...] no different from the variability that characterizes healthy languages and language varieties.” As Dorian (2010: 289–290) points out, though, other work by Wolfram and Beckett states that “individual variation is insignificant in the description of linguistic and social covariance” (Wolfram and Beckett 2000: 5–6) only to conclude by remarking on “patterns of inexplicable individual variation” akin to personal-pattern variation (Wolfram and Beckett 2000: 27). These issues have recently been revisited in contemporary variationist work (e.g., Carmichael and Gudmestad 2019; Kasstan 2019, 2020; Gudmestad and Carmichael 2022) which positions itself in opposition to assumptions of monostylism or “stylistic shrinkage” as a consequence of language loss (Dressler 1972, 1991; Campbell and Muntzel 1989) and calls for more nuanced and diverse studies of variation, social meaning and style in threatened languages (Meyerhoff et al. 2020)

This study attempts to answer this call by attending to how and whether speakers of threatened languages employ variation as a stylistic resource to make social meaning (Coupland 2007; Eckert 2008). I suggest that the muddied waters might be clarified by recalling that “problems arise when one limits attention to categories, takes them as given rather than as products of social practice, and focuses on boundaries rather than what people do with boundaries” (Eckert 2018: 127). That is, although certain variants may correlate with social categories in endangered languages (e.g. Gudmestad and Carmichael 2022; Kasstan 2019), closer examination is required to determine how variants are enregistered with meaning over time and come to be employed indexically in processes such as stancetaking (Silverstein 1976, 2003; Agha 2003; Jaffe 2012).

The context for this study is the historically French- and Creole-speaking region of South Louisiana. The study of Louisiana Regional French (hereafter LF) has already offered a productive testbed for theories of variation in small commu-

nities undergoing language shift (Rottet 2001; Klingler and Dajko 2006; Carmichael 2007; Dajko 2020; Dajko and Carmichael 2014; Carmichael & Gudmestad 2019; Gudmestad and Carmichael 2022). This paper concentrates on Louisiana Creole (hereafter LC), the territory's lesser-studied, endangered French-lexifier Creole. LC holds rich potential for the study of social meaning in endangerment: intra- and inter-speaker variation are rife, potentially representing personal-pattern variation, yet much of this variation seems to pattern consistently with the social construct of race (Klingler 2019; Mayeux 2019).

When Louisiana was Americanized, shifts in language use accompanied shifts in racial identities (see also Dajko 2012). Under French and Spanish rule, Louisiana had a tripartite caste distinction between “the master-caste of whites [*blancs*], an intermediary caste of (typically *bourgeois* or *petit bourgeois*) people of color [*gens de couleur libres*], and a subjugated caste of blacks [*noirs*]” (Barthé 2016: 24). Various phenotypical labels—*griffe*, *mulâtre*, *quateron*, *nègre*, *blanc*, etc.—were also used, as in other French and Spanish colonies in the Americas (Domínguez 1986; Landry 2016; Barthé 2021). Whatever their caste or phenotypical classification, all of these people were ethnically Creoles: “*créole* means native and has no reference to color or race” (*The Nebraska Advertiser*, 15 July 1858 in Landry 2016: 5). Americanization collapsed these distinctions into an Anglo-American racial binary enforced through Jim Crow segregation, a “regime of institutionalized terror and violence” (Barthé 2016: 85). Americanization also involved the intrusion of English into even the most rural communities, a process which reached its peak in the mid-20th century (Shugg 1939; Domínguez 1986; Kein 2000; Jolivet 2007; Landry 2016; Dubois et al. 2018; Barthé 2021).

The pages that follow constitute a sociolinguistic history of ways of speaking preceding and following this point of linguistic “tip” (Dorian 1981: 51) relying especially on first-hand testimony from people I interviewed. This approach is borne primarily of my concern that statistical analyses in my previous work risk essentializing the link between language use and race and so obscuring individuals’ linguistic histories and practices.¹ Whether the use of certain variables correlates with ethnic and racial labels in LC no longer remains a pressing research question: the empirical literature clearly supports this conclusion (Tentchoff 1977; Neumann 1983; Klingler 2019; Mayeux 2019; see Section 2). Instead, I ask:

1. How have ways of speaking LC reflected changing constructions of race in Louisiana?
2. Given the critically endangered status of LC, do stylistic variants continue to have social meaning?

¹ I am grateful to a reviewer, whose constructive and detailed critique of a previous version of this paper gave me the confidence to adopt this perspective here.

The history of speaking LC is inextricably linked with its origins amongst people enslaved in South Louisiana as well as with historical and contemporary manifestations of racism and Jim Crow segregation. As a White researcher, even in adopting a critical approach to Whiteness (e. g. McIntosh 1989; Bhopal 2018) and race in language (see Alim et al. 2016), my writing will unavoidably fail to capture the lived experiences of People of Color in a society which still privileges those classed as White and, as is the case in rural Louisiana, remains segregated. Here, I defer to the advice of Miss Mary (b. 1940), whom I interviewed in 2017:²

twa se ē nōm blā. to zāmē si wa sa. me mo mo wa sa. to p ap kōmprā sa. t ale zāme kōmprā sa. [...] je krwa je stil galpe nuzot le nwar [...] se pa zoli.

'You're a White man. For sure, you've never experienced [racism]. But *I* experienced it. You don't understand it. You'll never understand it. [...] They [Whites] think they still run us³ Black folks. It's not pretty.'⁴

(Miss Mary, b. 1940)

Section 2 introduces the problem of variation in LC and its links to race. Section 3 constitutes a historical-sociolinguistic account of language and race in Louisiana. Section 4 describes ways of speaking LC today, notably how and whether speakers manipulate variants to make social meaning and index racial identities. Section 5 discusses how some variants retain social meaning while others do not. I attempt to reconcile the notion of stylistic shrinkage with contemporary variationist work before concluding in Section 6.

2 Race and variation in Louisiana Creole

Linguists working with the remaining speakers of LC and LF in South Louisiana have long been confronted by the “extraordinary degree of variation in the speech of individuals [...] [which] poses frustrating analytical problems” (Tentchoff 1977: 2–3; see also Morgan 1970: 53–54; Calvet 1996). Much of this challenge relates to how, even *whether*, to impose a boundary between LC and LF especially in cases where speakers seem to mix features which belong to either system (Klingler 2003a;

² Throughout this paper I follow the rural Louisiana norm of using “Mr.” or “Miss” following an elder’s given name or nickname (*ti nō*). In this case, the given names are pseudonyms. Year of birth and, if applicable, of death in parentheses. All examples broadly transcribed in the IPA with English switches in angle brackets.

³ To run is to ‘dominate’ and is calqued in LC (*galpe nuzot*).

⁴ Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

Wendte 2022). Most work has focused on the extent to which the use of LF(-like) features in LC constitutes decreolization and might evidence the historical presence of a continuum (Tentchoff 1977; Neumann 1985; Marshall 1987; Klingler et al. 1997; Klingler 2005).

Although French-lexifier Creoles and French by definition exhibit many lexical similarities, the case of LC and LF is unusual in that their lexica approach near-identity (Morgan 1970; Klingler et al. 1997; Klingler 2005). To complicate matters further, the emic perspective on language boundaries has everything to do with ethnic identity and little to do with linguistic structure. Post-Americanization, the ethnic identities ‘Creole’ and ‘Cajun’ today more-or-less equate to the Anglo-American racial categories ‘Black’ and ‘White’ (Trépanier 1991; Dajko 2012; Giancarlo 2018). Self-identified Cajuns call their variety ‘Cajun (French)’ regardless of whether they are speaking what a linguist would identify as LC or LF. Creoles, similarly, refer to their variety as ‘Creole (French)’. From an emic perspective, who you are determines what you speak (see Klingler 2003a; Dajko 2012; Wendte 2020).

Tab. 1. Variants labelled ‘French’ and ‘Creole’.

| Example features | ‘Creole’ variant | ‘French’ variant |
|------------------------------|-------------------------------|---|
| Verb ‘have’ | <i>gɛ̃</i> | <i>e, a</i> |
| Verbal inflection | Final <i>-e</i> only | Various, e.g. <i>vule</i> ‘want.IMPF’ |
| 1s pronoun | <i>mo</i> | <i>ʒ</i> |
| 2s pronoun | <i>to</i> | <i>ti/ty</i> |
| 3s pronoun | <i>li</i> | <i>i(l)(masc.)</i> <i>ɛl/al (fem.)</i> |
| 1PL pronoun | <i>nu, nuzɔt</i> | <i>ʒ(n)</i> |
| 1s/2s/3s plural possessive | <i>mo</i> | <i>me</i> |
| determiners | <i>to</i> <i>so</i> | <i>te</i> <i>se</i> |
| 1s/2s/3s feminine possessive | <i>ma</i> | <i>me</i> |
| determiner | <i>ta</i> <i>sa</i> | <i>te</i> <i>se</i> |
| Front vowel rounding | [i] [e] [ɛ] | [y] [ø] [œ] |
| Final /r/ in coda | Absent, e.g. [sɛ] ‘sister’ | Present, e.g. [sœr] ‘sister’ |

Within this system, speakers assign values to some of the few features which diverge between LC and LF. After Wendte (2022) and Klingler (2003a), Table 1 shows variants “characteristic” (Wendte 2020, 2022) of these two codes. These variants do not constitute a strict dividing line between LC and LF in linguistic terms due to bidirectional contact-induced change (and especially the incorporation of LF var-

variants into LC). For many speakers, however, these variants nevertheless index two different ways of speaking (Hymes 1985): ‘French’ and ‘Creole’ or, when pushed, ‘White’ and ‘Black’ (see also Tentchoff 1977).⁵

Wendte (2022) analyzes such variants in the lyrics of zydeco musician Clifton Chenier. Chenier’s use of both ‘French’ and ‘Creole’ variants constitutes one of the “component behaviors in his ethnolinguistic identity repertoire which allowed him to perform a multifaceted Creole identity” (Wendte 2022: 182). Wendte (2018) suggests that the use of these variants amongst Black-racialized Creoles—speakers of LC and LF—in Texas exhibits socially neutral variation.

The present study builds on Wendte’s work to focus on how the use of these variants is, or is not, socially meaningful amongst LC-speakers racialized as Black and White. I adopt the Anglo-American constructs ‘Black’ and ‘White’ as analytical categories fully cognizant of their contested status in Creole Louisiana – these will allow us to discuss why and how the imposition of racial segregation has manifested in linguistic behavior in LC.

2.1 Variation in Black and White?

Speakers of LC racialized as Black and White use different proportions of ‘French’ variants; understanding why remains a challenge (Neumann 1983; Calvet 1996). For economy’s sake, and because they prove particularly informative, the focus here will be on two features in Table 1:

1. front vowel rounding (hereafter FVR), and
2. subject pronouns (especially 1s: ‘French’ *ʒ* vs. ‘Creole’ *mo*).

Figure 1 illustrates the problem at hand and introduces the dataset by displaying the mean proportion of FVR, i. e. [y], [ø], and [œ] for [i], [e], and [ɛ]. These vowels have been described as *the* dividing line between LF and LC (Broussard 1942: 1; Clifton 1975: 109; Tentchoff 1977: 125). Figure 1 represents 1,885 vowel tokens across 24 speakers in a corpus of sociolinguistic interviews collected in St Martin Parish, Louisiana in 2017. Interviews were of varying lengths and samples averaging 2,495 tokens per speaker were transcribed and coded.⁶ Speakers are grouped as ‘Black’ and ‘White’ based on their segregated schooling as children.

Figure 1 clearly shows the role of this racial segregation in conditioning FVR. Unsurprisingly, it emerges as a statistically significant predictor of variation in

⁵ The label ‘Cajun’ is seldom used to refer to ‘French’ or ‘White’ variants, especially by White creolophones for whom this would delegitimize their own use of LC.

⁶ For details see Mayeux (2019: Ch. 3).

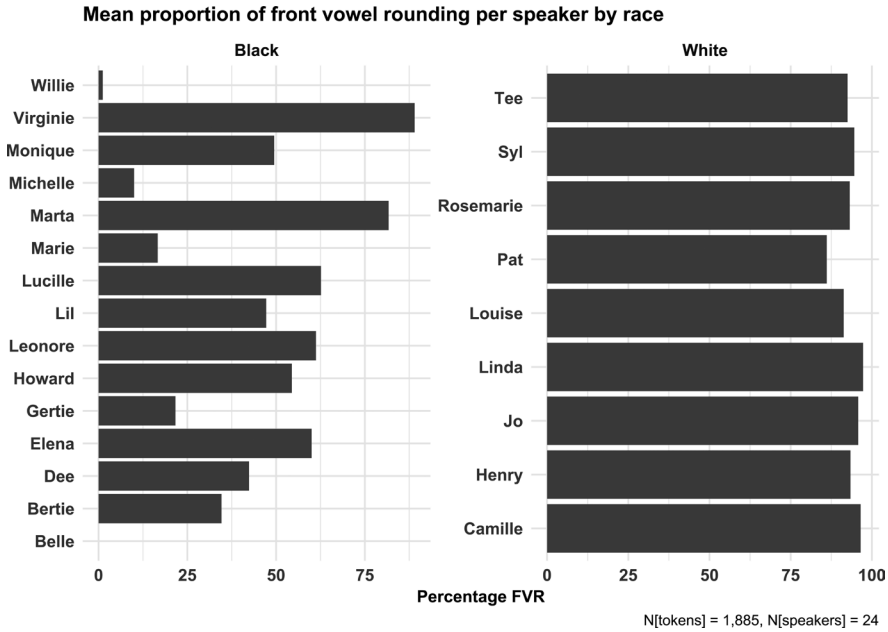


Fig. 1: Rates of front vowel rounding (FVR) amongst 24 speakers of LC, grouped by Anglo-American racial label ‘Black’ or ‘White’.

mixed-effects regression modelling (see Mayeux 2019). We might generalize that White speakers employ FVR near-categorically whereas Black speakers average about 50 % (Klingler 2019; Mayeux 2019). While this perspective has its merits, what is lost is the rich variation found *between* and *within* individual speakers in the corpus, especially Black speakers who range from 0 % (Mr. Willie) to 94 % (Miss Virginie) in their proportion of FVR. Crucially, the correlation between FVR and race tells us little about social meaning; instead, we must concentrate on how links between race and linguistic behaviors have been (re)constructed over time (Eckert 2008: 454, 2018: 127).

3 The Americanization of race and language in Creole Louisiana

The sale of Louisiana to the United States in 1803 is often taken as the beginning of the end for Creole society. However, Americanization proceeded gradually at first: “for about forty years after the cession to the United States, the Louisianians of

French descent studied little English and, in reality, did not absolutely need that language in their daily pursuit” (Fortier 1884: 97). LC and LF remained languages of the plantation society, spoken by plantation owners—*créoles blancs* and *gens de couleur libres*—and the enslaved alike. Following the Sugar Boom of the 1830s, thousands of enslaved anglophones were transported from the North and exerted considerable linguistic “pressure from below” although they were also under pressure to learn LC (see Picone 2003). In her memoirs, Laura Locoul Gore (1861–1963) recalled “the Creole Negro servants hated the American Negroes and made them very unhappy because they did not speak the Negro French dialect” (Locoul Gore 2007: 33). In the Reconstruction Era, English became increasingly prevalent amongst the White and Creole of Color *bourgeoisie* who adopted it as the language of commerce and politics. It was used only a little amongst the working classes, who remained marginalized and spoke LC and local varieties of French (Fortier 1891: 77). At this time, rural working-class Black and White families often lived and worked in close contact—sharecropping, hunting, and trapping—which resulted in mutual linguistic influence (Neumann 1983, 1985; Klingler 2003b).

Fortier (Fortier 1891; see also Lane 1934; Morgan 1970) reports something close to Standard French as the language of the White Creole *bourgeoisie* in the capital of St. Martin Parish, St. Martinville (once nicknamed *petit Paris(!)*). St. Martinville native Broussard (1942: viii) echoed earlier remarks by Fortier (1891) and Mercier (1880) in reporting LC as his “language of childhood”. Several linguists (Fortier 1891; Lane 1934, 1935; Conwell and Juilland 1963; Morgan 1970) record LC was typically used amongst the working classes, both White and Black. White speakers used a variety of LC heavily influenced by French while Black speakers made use of French variants in LC when conversing with Whites (Lane 1935: 8; Morgan 1970: 51–52). The most remarked-upon of these variants is FVR (cf. Section 2):

The Negro-French [i. e. LC] in St. Martin parish seems to be passing through a transition period. Since most of the [White] Creoles speak the dialect and the Negroes converse freely with them, the Negroes are imitating the dialect as spoken by the Creoles. And the dialect as spoken by the Creoles is different from the original dialect, particularly in the matter of vowels. The dialect as spoken today by [White] Creoles contains practically all the mixed vowels and I find that the Negroes of today have acquired these vowels. It is not uncommon to hear a Negro pronounce *y* and *oe* [sic].

(Bienvenu 1933: 1; see also Broussard 1942: 1)

By the mid-20th century, ‘French’ and ‘Creole’ variants were enregistered as indexes of ‘White’ and ‘Black’. For Whites, this was an important way of distancing themselves from Blackness in a racist society. For Black speakers, ‘French’ variants were used in hierarchical interactions to craft a “respectable” (Tentchoff 1977: Ch. 6) persona and were thus “replete with social meaning” (1977: 83).

Tentchoff (1977) presents an ethnography of a rural community in the early 1970s, where Anglo-American racial and linguistic norms had only recently penetrated (1977: 90). Tentchoff (1977: 76-78) presents an example, reproduced here, of the use of ‘French’ variants in LC in an interaction charged with racial inequity. The speaker is a sharecropper, Mr. Ti-Boug,⁷ a “very light mulatto” who is “phenotypically white” and was racialized as Black (1977: 75). In the extract, he is visiting the home of the elderly White plantation foreman to pay one third of his cash crop. ‘French’ forms are bolded, ‘Creole’ forms underlined:

ʃn a ete** o bal a la mes **ʃn a** afte di <fried chicken>. mo pote li si labab. li mǎʒe plis ke mwē. **ʃn ave** de moso k te lese. **ʒ e** di- **ʒ e** di- ti bug di **il a a** mǎʒe ase. **ʒ e** di Papit mǎʒe ase. me, **ʒ e** di mwē m a mǎʒe sa pi m a soti o bal. apre <the intermission> li t ape dāse, mwē e <Therese> apepre lwē li kom madam <Jean> la. [...] sa fe, mwē mo fe mo pa ape gade li vu **konese

‘We were at the ball, at mass; we had bought some fried chicken. I carried it onto the table. He ate more than me. We had some pieces left. I said, I said, the guy said “he ate enough.” I said “Papit ate enough.” But, I told myself I’d eat a bit then I’ll go out and dance. After the intermission he was dancing. Therese and I were dancing about as far away as Miss Jean is there. So, I wasn’t looking at him, you know?’

Mr. Ti-Boug uses *vu*, a pronoun used by children to address adults or, tellingly, by Black speakers when addressing Whites. The plantation foreman and his wife address Mr. Ti-Boug with the informal generic 2s pronoun *to*. Amongst other stylistic variants, Mr. Ti-Boug alternates between use of LC pronouns (*mo* 1s, *li* 3s) and LF pronoun-verb constructions (*ʒ e* [1s have.1s] ‘I had’; *il a* [3s have.3s], ‘he had’; *ʃn a ete* [1PL have.AUX be.PART]; *ʃn ave* [1PL have.IMPF] ‘we had’). Unfortunately, Tentchoff does not include FVR in her transcriptions though she comments elsewhere that it evokes a fundamental difference (1977: 89, 125). Tentchoff (1977: 77) emphasizes that this mixing of ‘French’ and ‘Creole’ forms did *not* take place between equals: speaking like this in front of Black LC speakers, Mr. Ti-Boug might be mocked for “putting on airs” (Tentchoff 1977: 120). In this hierarchical context, Mr. Ti-Boug adopts a stance of “respectability” (Tentchoff 1977: Ch. 6) through stylistic use of ‘French’ variants.

The processes defining this interaction began earlier in Mr. Ti-Boug’s life. The mid-20th century marked the end of “shared Catholic churches, labor, activities, residential settlement patterns” as “Creole communities found themselves in an American, racially divided world” (Landry 2016: 3). Several factors conspired to make this the point of linguistic ‘tip’ for LC, not least the entrenchment of English-only education policies, the Second World War and the ‘American High’. In all: getting ahead meant being American, and being American meant speaking English.

⁷ Pseudonym from Tentchoff (1977: 75).

Children born in the 1950s were among the very last to acquire LC or LF. This intensification of the Americanization of even rural Louisiana reinforced a shift away from local ethnic identities, such as Mr. Ti-Boug's, and towards both binary racial designations and the English language (Domínguez 1986; Dajko 2012; Landry 2016; Barthé 2021). Even families were cleaved apart, with one branch racialized as Black and the other as White (Landry 2016: 1). The same split played out between childhood friends and neighbors across Creole communities:

je va pase mwa 5 la ry e je selm5 di pa mwa b5zur. nu te kutym ku5e d5 mem lit, m5ze 5 la mem tab, 3ue 5som k5 no te piti. [...] to te g5e p kone to te p5 py mele ek le piti bl5.

'They pass me by on the street and they don't even say hello. We used to sleep in the same bed, eat at the same table, play together as kids. [...] you had to learn that you couldn't mix with the White kids anymore.'

(in Neumann 1985: 386)

All this meant that LC-speakers racialized as Black found themselves "doubly marginalized" (Dubois et al. 2018: 87; Squint 2005). For sharecroppers like Mr. Ti-Boug, peonage persisted well into the 1960s and into the 1970s in some areas of Louisiana (Blackmon 2009). The interwar period saw the intensification of residential segregation, the "structural lynchpin" of racial stratification in the United States (Pettigrew 1979: 14). In St Martin Parish, Black Creoles relocated to all-Black 'sub-divisions' (Maguire 1987: 165; see also Breton and Louder 1979).

Ethnographic research by Maguire (1979, 1987) in the Promised Land sub-division provides a valuable window on this highly interdependent network of Black families living "on the margin, hustling to survive" (1987: 212). Amongst other practices, LC came to index solidarity as "a rather private language in the sense that it is not broadcast to outsiders but is used in certain situations where a community 'in-group' exists." (Maguire 1979: 301, see also 1987: 396). Given the role that LC took on as a marker of in-group identity, it is no surprise that the language was maintained in Black communities even when many children were made to learn English in schools. In those rural communities, little provision for education was made by the State: in 1940, State spending on Black schools was 24% of that allocated for White schools (Fairclough 1999: 36). Black children had to walk to school, sometimes several miles, in all weather; meanwhile, White children passed by on school busses:

le bl5 te raj b5s pa nuz5t le n5g. k5 je te pase a nuz5t je te kra5e 5 nuz5t.

'The White kids rode the bus, not us Black kids. When they passed us by they used to spit on us.'

(Miss Michelle, b. 1944)

During harvest season, or sometimes for most of their childhoods, the children of sharecroppers worked in the fields instead of attending school:

na ē ta dā motfɛn laʒ ki zāmē kuri lekɔl [...] li te kuri lekɔl ē ti pø ʒɪfka je aprā j <A, B, C> epi je <one, two, three> epi je te dā klo. to wa je te bezwēn det dā klo pu fe je travaj.

‘Many people my age never went to school [...] he went to school until they learned their ABCs and one-two-threes, and then they were out in the field. You see, they had to be out in the field to work.’

(Miss Dee, b. 1927)

Black schools were sometimes staffed by LC speakers from the community, or else by Black women from elsewhere. These women typically lodged with local families, integrated into community life, and permitted some LC at school. In cases where a teacher was stricter on the English-only rule, the schools were too overcrowded and overstretched to enforce it rigorously (Maguire 1987: 219).

White children were bussed to better funded schools where they encountered children from outside their communities. Teachers in those schools were not necessarily local and did enforce strict English-only policies on school grounds, often through corporal punishment. Some children went to great lengths to continue using their language:

no te pa syoze parle krejɔl dā lakur a lekɔl. me no te kuri dā la fāmbabē dā l <restroom> epi no parle krejɔl

‘We weren’t supposed to speak Creole in the school playground. But we went into the restroom and we spoke Creole.’

(Miss Rosemarie, b. 1942)

By the 1970s, ‘Creole’ variants invoked ‘roughness’ and, ultimately, Blackness (see Tentchoff 1977: Ch. 6). For White and Black men and boys, LC could be used subversively in the construction of machismo but, for women, speaking LC was heavily stigmatized (Tentchoff 1977: 116–117). This was especially true for White women, who often intermarried with francophone Whites: these women described to me how they learned “good French” when dating their spouses; these attempts were sometimes denigrated by their in-laws with racial epithets (e. g. “n— French”).

4 Ways of speaking and social meaning in contemporary Louisiana Creole

The last vestiges of such ideologies are discernible today, though passing out of memory as the last generation themselves pass on. Table 2 summarizes the use of ‘Creole’ and ‘French’ variants in my 2017 corpus, tabulating subject pronouns and FVR tokens across 24 LC speakers. The use of ‘French’ subject pronoun *ʒ* occurs only a few times in the corpus. As in Figure 1, use of ‘French’ vowels amongst White speakers is near-categorical but varies widely amongst Black speakers.

Tab. 2. Variants for Front vowel rounding (‘French’ = [y], [ø], [œ]; ‘Creole’ = [i], [e], [ɛ]) and subject pronouns (‘French’ = *ʒ*; ‘Creole’ = *mo*), with percentage of ‘French’ variant given.

| Alias | Front vowel rounding | | | | | | 1s pronoun | | | Gen- der | Birth year | Hometown | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|-----|-----|-----|-----|-----|------------|----------|-----------|-------------|---------------|----------|-----------------|
| | [y] | [i] | [ø] | [e] | [œ] | [ɛ] | FVR % | <i>ʒ</i> | <i>mo</i> | | | | <i>ʒ</i> % |
| Black speakers | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Belle | 0 | 11 | 0 | 6 | 0 | 9 | 0% | 0 | 10 | 0% | F | 1925 | St. Martinville |
| Bertie | 7 | 23 | 18 | 16 | 2 | 12 | 35% | 0 | 42 | 0% | F | 1952 | Cecilia |
| Dee | 8 | 17 | 14 | 14 | 3 | 3 | 42% | 0 | 20 | 0% | F | 1927 | Cecilia |
| Elena | 7 | 7 | 5 | 2 | 6 | 3 | 60% | 0 | 27 | 0% | F | 1922 | Breaux Bridge |
| Gertie | 10 | 17 | 11 | 35 | 0 | 24 | 22% | 0 | 73 | 0% | F | 1951 | Breaux Bridge |
| Howard | 9 | 24 | 21 | 6 | 13 | 6 | 54% | 0 | 29 | 0% | M | 1956 | St. Martinville |
| Leonore | 21 | 6 | 21 | 18 | 18 | 14 | 61% | 0 | 21 | 0% | F | 1933 | Breaux Bridge |
| Lil | 2 | 11 | 5 | 7 | 10 | 1 | 47% | 0 | 12 | 0% | F | 1949 | Parks |
| Lucille | 12 | 20 | 22 | 8 | 23 | 6 | 63% | 0 | 60 | 0% | F | 1956 | Breaux Bridge |
| Marie | 1 | 17 | 6 | 23 | 2 | 5 | 17% | 0 | 56 | 0% | F | 1940 | Breaux Bridge |
| Marta | 25 | 8 | 30 | 4 | 12 | 3 | 82% | 0 | 42 | 0% | F | 1944 | St. Martinville |
| Michelle | 3 | 17 | 3 | 20 | 0 | 17 | 10% | 0 | 52 | 0% | F | 1944 | Parks |
| Monique | 10 | 15 | 23 | 15 | 14 | 18 | 49% | 0 | 23 | 0% | F | 1945 | Parks |
| Virginie | 7 | 5 | 32 | 3 | 42 | 2 | 89% | 14 | 15 | 48% | F | 1952 | Cecilia |
| Willie | 0 | 14 | 1 | 52 | 0 | 18 | 1% | 0 | 18 | 0% | M | 1956 | Parks |
| TOTALS | 122 | 212 | 212 | 229 | 145 | 141 | 45% | 14 | 500 | 3% | | | |

Tab. 2 (continued)

| Alias | Front vowel rounding | | | | | | 1s pronoun | | | Gen-der | Birth year | Hometown | |
|-----------------------|----------------------|-----------|------------|----------|------------|-----------|-------------|-----------|------------|------------|------------|----------|----------------|
| | [y] | [i] | [ø] | [e] | [œ] | [ɛ] | FVR % | ʒ | mo | | | | ʒ % |
| White speakers | | | | | | | | | | | | | |
| Camille | 26 | 0 | 14 | 0 | 44 | 3 | 97 % | 2 | 37 | 5 % | F | 1950 | Henderson |
| Henry | 32 | 4 | 27 | 0 | 26 | 2 | 93 % | 7 | 25 | 22 % | M | 1956 | Cecilia |
| Jo | 13 | 1 | 26 | 0 | 52 | 3 | 96 % | 16 | 31 | 34 % | F | 1946 | Henderson |
| Linda | 20 | 1 | 25 | 0 | 27 | 1 | 97 % | 0 | 65 | 0 % | F | 1950 | Cecilia |
| Louise | 20 | 4 | 31 | 0 | 33 | 4 | 91 % | 1 | 46 | 2 % | F | 1937 | Cecilia |
| Pat | 36 | 10 | 17 | 0 | 9 | 0 | 86 % | 2 | 52 | 4 % | M | 1931 | St-Martinville |
| Rosemarie | 40 | 1 | 40 | 1 | 43 | 7 | 93 % | 14 | 75 | 16 % | F | 1942 | Cecilia |
| Syl | 27 | 4 | 25 | 0 | 18 | 0 | 95 % | 0 | 61 | 0 % | M | 1950 | Henderson |
| Tee | 31 | 5 | 45 | 2 | 23 | 1 | 93 % | 1 | 54 | 2 % | M | 1951 | Henderson |
| TOTALS | 245 | 30 | 250 | 3 | 275 | 21 | 93 % | 43 | 446 | 9 % | | | |

Miss Elena (1923–2018), the oldest speaker I had the privilege of meeting, gave her thoughts on this variation. As a young child, Miss Elena worked in the cotton and cane fields before, at age 13, she began working in the homes of White families. She would continue to this work until her old age.

mo se kuri a lekɔl le apre-midi. travaje le maten fe le blā. tuzu travaje fe mo lavi fe le blā. e bebesit le piti blā. <We made it hard, honey. And you know we was raised without a Momma. My Momma died when we was young.>

‘I would go to school in the afternoons. In the mornings I would work at the White folks’ house. [I’ve] always made my living at White folks’ houses. And babysitting White kids. We made it hard, honey. And you know we was raised without a Momma. My Momma died when we was young.’

(Miss Elena, 1923–2018).

Miss Elena’s lifelong exposure to LF in the homes of White families might explain her acute awareness of the social meaning of certain ‘White’ variants, despite not using them herself. She could speak “ʒ *eme sa* and *mo lēm sa*” i. e. LF and LC, invoked here with the pronominal and verbal clusters meaning ‘I like that’. Amongst other features, she explained that subject pronouns *mo* (1s) *li* (3s) were what “us Black people would say” whereas “y’all, the White people” would use *ʒ* (1s) and *el* (3s.F)

as well as gender and number agreement. She was the only speaker who attributed social meaning to phonology, though not FVR; she indicated coda /r/ as ‘White’ speech.

Miss Elena was amongst the last of the generation to come of age when Americanization was just beginning and worked in a highly hierarchical context similar to Mr. Ti-Boug in Tentchoff (1977) (see Section 3). Younger Black speakers hardly noticed this kind of variation. I interviewed Miss Bertie (b. 1952) at her home with my friend, a Black LC speaker.

*s a pitet vini ply move me s a pa **mje**. le <official> no gē k ape galope le zafer-la se sa k pi bon. mhm-mhm. mo krwa pa s ale vini **mjə**. <I don’t see that,> mo war pa sa. li te gē tu le zen mun-la <motivated>. je te-ol-je t ap lēmē l ekɔl. o we. je di o no pitet pø det prezidā kā m a vini vjø <you don’t know.> [...] sa sa mm se pa gē p vini **mjø** pu nuzt.*

‘It might get worse but it won’t get better (*mje*). The officials we have running things now, they’re what’s no good anymore. Mhmhm. I don’t think it’ll get better (*mjə*). I don’t see that. I don’t see that. He [Obama] had all the young people motivated. They were oh – they were loving school. Oh yeah. They said, “Oh we could be president when we grow up, you don’t know.” [...] So, that means it isn’t necessarily going to get better (*mjø*) for us.’

Miss Bertie’s use of FVR varies widely. She uses three different variants of word for ‘better’ ([*mje*], [*mjø*], [*mjə*]; in bold) in the same stretch of speech, speaking about the same topic, with the same interlocutors. The same is true elsewhere in the conversation (e. g., [*pø*] vs. [*pe*] ‘can’; [*vjø*] vs. [*vje*] ‘old’). This patterning of FVR reflects trends observed amongst all the Black LC speakers I interviewed. None of the Black speakers I interviewed attributed social meaning to front vowel rounding, and only a few pointed to pronominal forms as iconic of the divide between LC and LF or ‘Black’ and ‘White’ speech. None of them used *ʒ* or other pronouns in their LC. Wendte (2018, 2020) observed much the same in his work with Black LC and LF speakers in East Texas.

Miss Virginia is the only Black speaker I interviewed who switches between ‘Creole’ and ‘French’ subject pronouns. In contrast to the White speakers described below, she does this seemingly at random. It is difficult to account for her use, especially as she excused sections of disorganized speech by disclosing to me that she has a degenerative neurological condition. While it might be tempting to take this as evidence of loss of stylistic control, I steer clear of such speculation here.

Amongst White speakers, I recorded occasional use of *ʒ* which in almost every case appeared socially meaningful. Some cases constituted direct quotation of LF speakers (Mr. Pat) or use of discourse markers, e. g., *ʒ di* ‘I say’ (Miss Rosemarie). Otherwise, iconic use of *ʒ* occurred when discussing linguistic or racial difference, often humorously, underscoring LC’s role as “the vehicle *par excellence* for jokes” (Tentchoff 1977: 84).

Mr. Tee (b. 1951) uses *ʒ* once when playfully deriding his grandson's high-school French classes:

me mo di <What you learn in school in that French? Probably nothing!> ʒ e ʒāme ete a ē klas pu war komā je mōt je!

'So I (*mo*) said, "What you learn in school in that French? Probably nothing!" I've (*ʒ e*) never been to a class to see how they teach them!'

The use of *ʒ* allows Mr. Tee to adopt the jocular stance of knowing-it-all: he knows they are learning 'nothing' in French class, despite never having been and despite—as his use of *ʒ* draws into contrast—speaking a different variety himself.

Miss Camille (b. 1950) used *ʒ* when discussing a visit to her daughter who lives in France, is married to a Frenchman and speaks Standard French at home. When discussing how she communicates with them, she quipped *sa ʒ fe se sa mo fe* ('What I [*ʒ*] do is what I [*mo*] do.'). Miss Camille is aware that she speaks differently to her family in France but, like Mr. Tee, uses *ʒ* to make light of it.

Iconic links between linguistic and racial difference were instantiated by Miss Louise (b. 1937) who recounted a surprise encounter with a Black LC speaker. Miss Louise emphasizes his race, describing him as a 'big Black guy', and as a zydeco musician (on zydeco and Creole ethnolinguistic identity, see Wendte 2022). Her surprise and delight comes from their mutual identification *despite* the difference in race, which is foregrounded by her use of 'French' pronouns (*ʒ* 1s; *i* 3s) imperfect inflection (*vule* 'want.IMPF') and verb choice (*par* 'go; leave', cf. LC *kuri*):

<Oh he hugged me! Big Black guy! He hugged me! > a to pal krejɔl! o! me vyē isit. <He held my hand while he introduced me to the others>. i vule pa ʒ par: sa te fe mo ʒɔŋgle ē ta. mo ʒ māk pa war kekēn ki pø pale avek mwa

'Oh he hugged me. Big black guy. He hugged me. "Ah, you speak Creole! Oh! Come here!" He held my hand while he introduced himself to the others. He didn't want me (*ʒ*) to leave. So that got me (*mo*) thinking a lot. I (*ʒ*) do miss having someone around to speak Creole with.'

A more involved case of socially meaningful use of 'French' subject pronouns occurred when I interviewed Miss Jo (1945–2020) who, at the start of the interview, adopted a defensive stance towards LC:

je di se te plys dō mōnn nwar skø lō mōnn blā ki pal kōm sa. Mo di wel mo se ē mōnn blā me se kōm sa no pale!

'They say it's more Black people than White people who speak like that. I say, well I'm a White person but that is how we spoke!'

This was evidenced in her stylistic choices early in the conversation, where she included many cases of the LF pronominal *ʒ* and inflected verb forms regardless of topic. A sudden shift occurred after she had asked about my own family. I gave a lengthy response in LC. Miss Jo was silent for a while before venturing:

mo apærsa to di mo gē. a [xxx] je se di ʒ e. mo pa kōne sa je se di. se tro dyr.

'I notice you say *mo gē* ('I have'). In [nearby all-White town] they would say *ʒ e* ('I have'). I don't know what they'd say – it's too hard!'

Miss Jo seemed to relax in my presence and, for the rest of the interview, only used *mo*.

My more relaxed interview with Mr. Tee, Miss Jo's brother, fit well with Tentchoff's (1977) observations on LC and the construction of a masculine persona: we were drinking beer, smoking and—as Mr. Tee characterized it—"shooting the shit". Another White man, Mr. Henry, only used *mo* until, at the end of the interview, we attempted a brief elicitation session. He tensed up and began using *ʒ* instead. When I pressed him on this, Mr. Henry, who calls his language 'Cajun French', laughed it off: *se pa tu kekʃɔʒ mɛm bat se tu lɔ mɛm kāmɛm!* ('It's not the same but it's all the same anyway!').

A final, regrettable anecdote will drive home some White LC speakers' insistence that they speak 'French' and, so, speak 'White'. In 2017, I interviewed Miss Linda (b. 1950), an LC speaker who proudly identified her language as 'Cajun French'. Throughout the interview she used only 'Creole' constructions, for example the pronoun *mo* instead of *ʒ* (see Table 2). A few months after I left town, she heard that I had been researching 'Creole'. In subsequent trips in 2019 and 2023, Miss Linda speaks to me using exclusively 'French' pronominal forms and has been attending French classes.

5 Racial segregation, language variation and social meaning

The Americanization of Creole Louisiana resulted in the imposition of English as a dominant language alongside the violent regime of Jim Crow segregation. Rural Louisianians' ethnic and linguistic identities shifted as a result of the imposition of the 'Black'/'White' racial binary, commonly instantiated today in 'Creole'/'Cajun' ethnic labelling practices (Dubois and Melançon 1997, 2000; Dubois and Horvath 2003; Dajko 2012; Wendte 2020). This has also been reflected in ways of speaking.

In a gradual process of enregisterment, ‘Creole’ and ‘French’ variants have become iconized as indexes of ‘Black’ and ‘White’ racial identity through linguistic differentiation (Irvine and Gal 2000). In linguistic terms, the construction of these differences hinges on near-total lexical unity between LF and LC linguistic systems. With a linguistic background of such similarity, points of divergence between LC and LF—such as subject pronouns or FVR—were foregrounded and heavily invested with social meaning. This social meaning, however, exhibits fine nuances across race, time, and linguistic domains.

5.1 Social meaning by race

White speakers, especially women, retain keen awareness of the dividing line between ‘French’ and ‘Creole’. Miss Jo and Miss Linda exemplify how, even today, some White LC-speakers still exhibit linguistic insecurity because their way of speaking is at odds with their racial identity. The iconic association between ‘Creole’ and Blackness, and racist judgements of this association, continue to motivate White speakers to draw on ‘French’ variants to recover their racial identities directly or indirectly, as in jocular stances adopted to make light of linguistic differences. Like Kasstan (2019) and Carmichael and Gudmestad (2019), I also find stylistic variants present in more attended-to speech styles as when Mr. Henry began using *ʒ* in elicitation.

These behaviors manifest in more nuanced ways amongst LC speakers racialized as Black. My observations echo ideas in Wendte (2018), who hypothesized that some leveling of social-racial hierarchies amongst Black-racialized Creoles who migrated to Texas gave rise to socially neutral variation in their LC and LF. Exchanges such as that in Section 3, when Mr. Ti-Boug’s uses ‘French’ variants to adopt a “respectable” persona in front of the elderly White plantation foreman, are confined to history. Racial inequity has taken on new domains which are English-speaking. Black speakers today are less likely to do identity work through the stylistic use of ‘French’ variants. Those with the most metalinguistic awareness of these variants are older speakers like Miss Elena, who was born before Americanization took hold and spent her life working for LF-speaking Whites. Further research is needed, but I understand the use of ‘Creole’ variants between Black speakers as an index of in-group membership, at least among those elderly speakers who continue to interact (see also Tentchoff 1977: 93). Black speakers today simply have no context to introduce ‘French’ variants into their speech; in fact, as Tentchoff (1977) and Wendte (2020) both observe, doing so might be read as flamboyant or ‘putting on airs’.

5.2 Social meaning by linguistic domain: Subject pronouns

Across both Black and White speakers, subject pronominal forms appear to be the most heavily invested with social meaning today. They often appear with a verb form, e. g. *mo gɛ* or *ʒ e* for ‘I have’. Wendte (2018, 2020) reports similar trends in East Texas. The results on subject pronouns also fit with prior work on LF, providing a neat correlate to Klingler’s (2022: 75) observation that ‘Creole’ pronouns such as *mo* were used to portray Black voices in folktales. Other work on LF finds differences in subject pronoun use between self-identified Cajuns and Indians (Rottet 2001; Dajko 2020) or between men and women (Gudmestad and Carmichael 2022). This may indicate a particular salience attributed to subject pronouns across Louisiana. These findings confirm that “speakers’ attitudes towards particular variants play a large role in the patterning of variation and change in moribund varieties ... selfconscious variants, including variants that serve as important symbols of identity, are likely to pattern in usual ways in both moribund and healthy varieties” (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999: 518). Salience has long been seen to play a role in in change-by-accommodation (Trudgill 1986, 1994; Niedzielski and Giles 1996; Kerswill and Williams 2002; Kerswill 2008; see also Jaeger and Weatherholtz 2016).

5.3 The fossilization of social meaning: Front vowel rounding

With a near-identical lexicon, FVR formed a salient point of difference between LC and LF. It underwent early enregisterment as ‘French’/‘White’, was quickly adopted by White LC speakers across the board and by Black speakers as a stylistic feature (Bienvenu 1933; Broussard 1942; Morgan 1970; Tentchoff 1977; see Section 3). Surprisingly, though, FVR no longer seems to feature in speakers’ stylistic repertoires even if it does pattern clearly by race (see Figure 1): both White and Black speakers employ FVR seemingly without regard for style.

I suggest that the social meaning of FVR underwent FOSSILIZATION. With the loss of intergenerational transmission of LC and its everyday use, once-dynamic stylistic processes were arrested. To the extent that it did occur, acquisition of LC was atypical with depleted contexts for acquiring communicative competence (Hymes 1985). The competence of elderly speakers like Miss Elena has attrited over time while other, younger speakers such as Miss Bertie may have acquired forms from attrited speakers or may simply have acquired different communicative competence. Variation in FVR today represents the linguistic leftovers of a once-dynamic system of social meaning. This variation is socially neutral (Dorian 2010, Wendte 2018) and patterns as a function of personal linguistic histories (i. e., personal-pattern varia-

tion), viz. “repeated use of a variant could not be counted on to convey a stylistic message with a common, community-wide interpretation” (Dorian 2010: 294).

This account rehabilitates the classic notion of stylistic shrinkage (Dressler 1972; Campbell and Muntzel 1989). Although I agree with Kasstan (2019, 2020) that some work lacked nuance, Dressler, often credited with coining the term, characterized stylistic shrinkage as a “tendency” (Dressler 1988: 188). Dorian (1981: 85; 1994a) herself argued against uniform monostylism (also noted by Kasstan 2020), and other studies debunked that assumption (e. g., Sabino 1994; Macevičiūtė-Aritz 2001; Carmichael 2007).

In the case of FVR, correlation with demographic categories clearly does not equate to social meaning. In much variationist work “social meaning came to be confused with the demographic correlations that point to it” (Eckert 2008: 454). In my view, this conflation is responsible for much of the debate on personal pattern-variation and stylistic shrinkage: authors such as Dorian (2010) and Wolfram (2004, as quoted in Section 1) have been talking at cross-purposes. Wolfram and colleagues (Schilling-Estes and Wolfram 1999; Wolfram and Beckett 2000; Wolfram 2004) view things from the top-down, taking correlations between pre-defined social categories and variation as evidence of socially meaningful style. Dorian’s perspective is bottom-up, first examining individual patterns of variation and then attributing idiosyncratic or social meaning to them.

Given the importance of individual speaker behavior, personal-pattern variation seems highly compatible with third-wave approaches to variation (see also Jones forthcoming). The fossilization of social meaning can be described in (clumsy!) terms as the de-enregisterment of variants as, over time, they are dissociated from the social categories they once indexed. Iconic relationships between language and social constructs may fade when the normative pressures for their co-construction are lost (see also Gal 1984). Orders of indexicality are, after all, ideologically embedded and subject to change (Silverstein 1976, 2003). That social meaning may change—or be lost entirely—as a speech community contracts is no surprise.

Note here that this is also not a claim about whether such use might be found to correlate with *linguistic* factors. Social meaning may presumably fossilize in a way governed by e. g., semantic domain or grammatical category because such factors may modulate L1 attrition (see e. g., Kaltsa et al. 2015). Likewise, psycholinguistic processes of acquisition and attrition determining the emergence of personal-pattern variation are likely to involve language practices across the lifespan (Dorian 2010: 296). Psycholinguistic work on heritage languages may offer an appropriate point of departure for further studies of personal-pattern variation (see also Polinsky 2018: 329–348).

6 Conclusion

This paper responds to, and echoes, calls for more serious consideration of social meaning in contexts of language endangerment (Dorian 1994a, 2010: 290; Jones forthcoming; Kasstan 2019; Meyerhoff et al. 2020) by problematizing whether and how speakers of LC use variation to stylistic ends. The Americanization of Louisiana involved not only the violent enforcement of the Anglo-American Black/White binary, but also the imposition of English on LC- and LF-speaking speech communities. Under these conditions, indexical links were enregistered between Black and White racial identities and iconized ‘Creole’ and ‘French’ linguistic variants. ‘French’ variants in LC were used, for example, by Black sharecroppers to adopt stances of respectability in the racist sharecropping hierarchy (see also Tentchoff 1977). Today, White speakers continue to use ‘French’ variants to index their White identity. Black LC speakers came to view ‘Creole’ variants as a mark of in-group identity and today make little to no stylistic use of ‘French’ variants. The extent to which social meaning is attributed to variants may be a function of their salient role differentiating the near-identical codes of LC and LF: subject pronouns and verb forms retain iconic use while phonological variation, once imbued with social meaning, does not. These findings should be tested further in quantitative dimensions. For now, I hypothesize that some variants have fossilized in diachronic perspective, resulting in socially neutral personal-pattern variation in synchronic data which correlates with, but no longer indexes, social categories; meanwhile, some other stylistic variants remain in limited use.

Overall, this study finds support for the idea that social meaning and stylistic variation may change *or* persist in contexts of language endangerment. This aligns with findings in classic Language Death research (Dorian 1981, 1994a, 2010; Sabino 1994; Jones 1998) as well as in modern variationist studies (Carmichael and Gudmestad 2019; Kasstan 2019; Kasstan 2020; Gudmestad and Carmichael 2022). I nevertheless also attempt to rehabilitate the notion of personal-pattern variation in language endangerment. In my view, personal-pattern variation has been subject to unfair reproach due to researchers taking as given that demographic correlations equate to social meaning (Eckert 2008: 454). This is not borne out in these data. Further variationist studies in minority-language communities promise to shed light on the distribution of variants according to social, linguistic and psycholinguistic factors as well as the role of styles, stances and other notions familiar to third-wave studies.

I have also tried to tell part of the story of racial segregation in rural Louisiana through a sociolinguistic lens. A major limitation of my work was anticipated by Miss Marie (cf. Section 1): as a White researcher, I remain blind to some social factors influencing linguistic behavior amongst LC speakers of color. I do not

exclude my race as a confound in interview settings (see Cukor-Avila and Bailey 2001): more research in Louisiana should be conducted by or with People of Color.

Acknowledgements: Many thanks to the reviewers for their critique of an earlier version of this paper. Reviewer 2 deserves special thanks for their careful, critical review by which this work has been much improved. Many thanks also to Mari C. Jones and Nathan A. Wendte for their encouragement and for many helpful discussions over the years which have informed my thinking. Most of all, *mo di mesi mil fwa* to all of those who took the time to share their stories with me, and dedicate this paper to the memories of those who are no longer with us. For the purpose of open access, the author has applied a Creative Commons Attribution (CC BY) licence to any Author Accepted Manuscript version arising from this submission.

Funding: UKRI AHRC Doctoral Studentship (1687496). Arts and Humanities Research Council (<http://dx.doi.org/10.13039/501100000267>, Grant Number: 1687496).

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