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A Metropolitan French Isolate in North America: the French language in Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon

by Marc Albert Cormier

Located twelve miles off the coast of the Canadian island of Newfoundland, the islands of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon are the only remnants of the former French Colonies of North America that are still an integral of the French Republic. After the Kingdom of France abandoned the French colonies of present-day Canada in 1763, and Emperor Bonaparte sold the Louisiana territories in 1803 to the United States of America, the gifting of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon by the British to Louis XVIII in 1814 under the Treaty of Paris meant France was still in control of a North American territory in the 19th, 20th and 21st centuries.

By granting through treaty rights, the control of these islands, the British ensured the French maintained access to the fertile waters of the Grand Banks of Newfoundland. Centuries later, despite an unfavorable resolution to the Franco-Canadian EEZ dispute and a decades-long closure of the Cod Fishery, the French Republic still controls this semi-autonomous territory.

The inhabitants benefit directly from France's national educational system and have full access to France's network of digital television and public French radio. They pride themselves with speaking Metropolitan French, in direct contrast with the closest francophone communities of Atlantic Canada and Quebec. The local population also contains a large segment of Metropolitan French workers, administrators, and job seekers with a regular turnover rate that contributes to a regular influx of Metropolitan French expressions and terminology.

The French language spoken in Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon has been the focus of study by several scholars and researchers such as Edgar Aubert de la Rüe, Carmen Roy, Patrice Brasseur, and Jean-Paul Chauveau.

While Aubert de la Rüe was mainly a geographer and geologist, and Roy a folklorist and ethnologist, Brasseur and Chauveau are linguists recognized for their research and contributions to the field. All observers cited previously made the same unanimous observation: the language spoken in Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon is essentially identical to the French spoken in France, i.e., Metropolitan or Hexagonal French, save a few lexicological variants related to the fishing industry as well as some inherited Acadian expressions within certain older families.

Aubert de la Rüe, who visited the islands regularly in the 1930s and 1940s, insists on the fact the French spoken in Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon does not have any resemblance to the French of Québec, but he does note that the French spoken on the island of Miquelon, does differ somewhat with the accent of Saint-Pierre, where the Acadian influence was greater throughout the island's history. He wrote extensively on the influence of the fishery on the local lexicon, and the influences of the French of Normandy on the local spoken French (Aubert de la Rüe).

Roy, while focused with on a mission to catalog Acadian culture and influences on the islands folklore and culture, recognized the islands were the scene of a living Metropolitan French culture (Roy). Brasseur and Chauveau wrote extensively on the fact the islanders consider their spoken French as clearly distinct from Canadian French, quoting multiple accounts of locals interacting with French Canadians and some of the difficulties encountered. Brasseur and Chauveau also note the islanders' opinions on Canadian French are not always favorable, comforted by the fact their language is intrinsically protected in its quality by their status of being full-fledged French Citizens (Brasseur et Chauveau).

The factors that led to the existence of this Metropolitan French enclave in North America are numerous: they are historical, geographical and political. While most North American Francophone populations saw direct links to France severed following the fall of New France and the treaty of Paris of 1763 and the sale of the Louisiana territories in 1803, Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon remained under direct colonial rule from France. Constant contact between Metropolitan France and the Colony was ensured through governmental administration and the regular presence of the seasonal French Fishing Fleet from Western France (Thibault). The islanders were therefore exposed to the gradual shift in the French accent following the French Revolution while the French of New France maintained the French of the ‘Ancien Régime’ (Wolf).

The population of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon, because it is surrounded by anglophone populations in its immediate geographical vicinity, was insulated from constant French-Canadian influences, be they Acadian or Québécois. While some islanders use a vernacular that can be partially traced back to Acadian roots, waning links with other such communities in Nova Scotia, New Brunswick, and the Magdalen Islands ensured the gradual decline of most expressions and vocabulary in everyday spoken French. With the island of Newfoundland as its immediate neighbor and Nova Scotia as a historical link for commerce and transportation, the French of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon was not regularly exposed to the accent of French Canada until the 20th century.

Comforted by the perceived superior quality of their spoken language, the locals engaged in a form of linguistic chauvinism in the second half of the 20th century by capitalizing on their “brand” of Metropolitan French with the support of the educational system of Anglophone Canada. One such program was the *Summer School at Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon* managed by the University of Toronto as early as 1959: “The idea of establishing a French summer language school in Saint-Pierre originated during a conversation between a group of professors of French from the

University of Toronto on vacation on the islands of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon in August 1959.” (Parsons). A similar program, managed by Memorial University of Newfoundland, known as the *The Summer Frecker Program*, is still in activity today: “The Summer Frecker Program is a 4-week long immersion program in Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon. Offered during Summer Session, students complete two Memorial University French courses at an accelerated pace (French 2300 and French 2900) while living with a French family.” (MUN)

Since 1992, the islands’ autonomous government manages a French Language institute known as the Francoforum whose mandate is to teach the French language to foreign students from Canada and the United States of America : “The Francoforum offers various immersion formulas throughout the year, adapted to demand and to the public concerned (students, professionals or individuals). The Archipelago becomes a classroom: we explore French culture through the practice of the language, visits, meeting the inhabitants of Saint-Pierre and Miquelon, discovering their history and their way of life.” (Government).

Among the many factors influencing the spoken language on the islands, one cannot ignore the influence radio and television has had in the latter half of the 20th century onwards, as well as the influence internet access has had since the mid-2000s onward (Stuart-Smith).

The island’s access to television and radio signals from nearby Canada and the United States, has had little or no effect on the spoken language of Saint-Pierre-et-Miquelon. Most islanders only had access to two, or three television signals during the late 60s, 70s, and 80s: one was the French-run, state-owned public broadcaster, whose station was inaugurated by President Charles de Gaulle during his 1967 visit to the islands and broadcast television signals in the now defunct SECAM format. Two other signals, in NTSC format, could be picked up from neighboring Newfoundland, they were CJON (NTV - Newfoundland Television) and CBNT (CBC - Canadian

Broadcasting Corporation) Newfoundland. CBC, Canada's public broadcaster, was, despite being an English language channel, quite popular with the local population as it was the sole Canadian broadcaster of the NHL (National Hockey League), ice hockey being an extremely popular spectator sports on the islands.

In the early 1990s, a local cable company started providing service to the majority of islanders with feeds from Detroit, Québec, and Atlantic Canada. From that point onwards, the influence of Québécois French may have increased, mostly amongst high consumers of television content from Québec and hockey fans who switched to Québécois sports channels as they became available. American and English-Canadian content had little or no impact on the local culture and remained mostly a curiosity. For twenty years, the island's access to television was mostly Canadian and American signals, and the state funded local television and radio broadcaster. Starting in 2011, France's full public television programming was available to the islanders: the *télévision numérique Terrestre*, or TNT, included public and private broadcasters from Metropolitan France. No research has been conducted on the influence of French Canadian versus Metropolitan French television and radio broadcasting on the island's evolution of the language, but such a study would certainly be welcome: it would clearly demonstrate or infirm the true influence of television broadcasting language on isolated populations and the spoken language.

The exceptionality of this Metropolitan French isolate is unique on the North American continent and demonstrates how strong institutional, governmental ties, as well as geographical and linguistic isolation, were paramount to the creating of this unique linguistic enclave in North America.

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