

## JEALOUS PRIESTS AND DRUNKEN ROBINS: USING CLICHÉ AND POPULAR METAPHOR TO ACHIEVE LEARNING GOALS IN FRENCH

Predictions for the future of French in Louisiana were dire when I entered the teaching profession in 1979. I wanted to participate in the effort, but despite having grown up in Louisiana and having heard the language all my life, I had only become fluent in French after spending time in a foreign country. Eager to make the French I taught more relevant by including local terms, structures and culture, I asked each student in my class to find a mentor in the community, a *parrain* or *marraine* who spoke the local French and could furnish language and cultural information corresponding to the themes we studied in class.

Their first assignment was straightforward enough. After studying a few basic salutations, the students were to collect from their mentors as many different greeting formulas as possible. They were quite proud to stride into class the next week, addressing me with their newfound greetings: “*Quoi ça dit, madame?*” (“What’s happening?”) and “*Comment les haricots?*” (literally, “How are the green beans?”). But when I greeted one student with a perfunctory “*Comment ça va?*,” her response, collected from her grandfather, caught my attention like none other I would hear that day: “*Mieux que ça et les prêtres seraient jaloux!*” (“Any better than this and the priests would be jealous!”)

Besides the fact that this was quite a mouthful for a beginning French student, the utterance had captured so many elements of Louisiana French culture—humor, Catholicism, an appreciation for hyperbole, and good-natured irreverence for the institutions we hold dear. I could have taught those individual words as vocabulary, but by learning them in the context of a beloved cliché, students were acquiring something far more lyrical and at the same time useful.

Popular metaphor and figures of speech are the poetry of our everyday communication. They enrich our expression with imbedded meaning, history and a sense of identity within a community. But unfortunately, they are an aspect of language that often gets neglected in second language classrooms. Within the context of the “Five C’s” set forth as strands of our national foreign language curriculum (Culture, Communication, Communities, Connections, Comparisons), though, they can be a wonderful tool.

Take, for example, popular similes. If we ask students to think about how they would complete clichés such as “big as..., white as..., red as..., drunk as...” in English,

we could predict with reasonable certainty that among the most common responses, we would get “big as a house, white as snow, red as a beet/tomato,” and “drunk as a skunk.” While some of these expressions translate readily and literally to French (“*grosse comme une maison, blanche comme la neige, rouge comme une tomate*”), it is interesting to discover that regional differences have to be taken into account, too. In Louisiana, for example, we are much more likely to be “as red as a crawfish” in English or “*rouge comme une écrevisse*” when speaking French. And in Louisiana French, when describing someone who has had too much to drink, we are most likely to say that he is “*soûl comme une grive*” (“drunk as a robin”). In fact, robins are much more likely to become inebriated than skunks because they, like many other birds, have a taste for fermented berries. Topsy birds have been known to fly in numbers into windshields and other obstacles after overindulging. And while we’re in the comparison-connection mode, we can point out to our students that the American robin is not the same species as the *rouge-gorge* or European robin. It is actually a member of the thrush, or *grive*, family, which is undoubtedly why early explorers gave that same name to the robins they encountered in the New World and why Cajuns and Creoles still use it today. And while the adapted nomenclature for the bird is North American, the saying “*soûl comme une grive*” is attested as early as the 1600s (Duneton et Claval, 1990), no doubt because the thrushes back home in Europe have long had the same alcoholic tendencies as their American cousins. So here is an example of how the study of one popular simile can help us make connections and comparisons in linguistics, history, zoology, and anthropology.

In 1992, with the help of a Teacher Scholar grant from the National Endowment for the Humanities and inspired by my students’ first contributions, I set out to inventory the metaphorical speech of south Louisiana. I interviewed 70 native speakers and consulted 30 doctoral and master’s theses and other works on regional French of the state. Most of the interviews were conducted in 1992 and 1993, while the written sources span a period from 1931 to 1992. In all, the research represents 23 different Louisiana parishes.

In 1995, with financial support from the Council on Basic Education, I undertook etymological research on these expressions. As it turns out, many of them are relics of the motherland, some dating back

as far as 11<sup>th</sup> century France. Sometimes, their metaphorical meaning remains intact; other times it has evolved. For example, to have *la fale basse* (“the craw low”) in Louisiana is to be hungry, whereas in Canada it means “to be tired or depressed” and in western France it means “to have a hard time making a living.” Other figures of speech have evolved structurally or lexically, while their meaning stays intact. For example, the outdated expression “*mentir comme un arracheur de dents*” (“to lie like a tooth puller”) still lives on in Louisiana as *mentir comme un dentiste* (“to lie like a dentist”). Of course, many of our expressions are homegrown, though often they reflect in their syntax a template that we share with other Francophones. When a Cajun talks about making “*gombo de babine*” (literally “pout gumbo”), i.e. commiserating with friends after a failed political campaign, he is tapping into the same linguistic heritage that prompts his European cousin to fret about having to eat his wife’s “*soupe à la grimace*” (“grimace soup”) when he gets home late for dinner.

A compilation of the best of these expressions was published in 1999 as *Tonnerre mes chiens! A Glossary of Louisiana French Figures of Speech*. I am very grateful the AATF Book Club for giving me an opportunity to share this aspect of Louisiana French with its members by featuring the book this year. I hope that you discover within the collection some new and interesting ways to introduce French Louisiana to your students. In this issue’s “Teaching Activities” section there is an activity based upon animal metaphors in the collection. Feel free to try it on for size and modify it according to your students’ needs. *Tonnerre mes chiens!* is available at [www.booksXYZ.com].

Amanda LaFleur

Duneton, Claude and Sylvie Claval. 1990.

*Le bouquet des expressions imagées: encyclopédie thématique des locutions figurées de la langue française*. Éditions du Seuil.

# CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

## LA FRANCOPHONIE ET LES ÉTATS-UNIS

The third teaching activity in the series on “La Francophonie et les États-Unis” takes us to Louisiana and to Louisiana French. The activity is based on phrases that are presented in *Tonnerre mes chiens! A Glossary of Louisiana French Figures of Speech* by Amanda LaFleur (Ville Platte, LA: Renouveau Publishing, 1999, 2006), one of the AATF Book Club selections for 2007 (see page 37).

As Amanda LaFleur notes in her introduction to the book, some Louisiana figures of speech have preserved metaphors that go back centuries in the French language. Others are distinctly Louisianian in vocabulary or image, as you will see.

To see more fascinating Louisiana French expressions, read the book! It's available at [www.xyzbooks.com].

If you have ideas for future Teaching Activities in the series “La Francophonie et les États-Unis,” please contact Randa Duvick at [randa.duvick@valpo.edu]. An answer key can be found on page 37.

### Louisiana French Expressions

#### I. Preparation exercise

1. How could you finish the following expressions in English?

He's sleeping like a \_\_\_\_\_.

It's as white as \_\_\_\_\_.

That's not worth \_\_\_\_\_. (to express worthlessness)

She's as smart as \_\_\_\_\_.

He really knows his \_\_\_\_\_.

2. Can you think of common expressions in English that include animals?

For example, “sick as a dog,” “scarce as hen's teeth”

3. Can you think of common expressions in English that include food?

For example, “she's as sweet as sugar,” “you can catch more flies with honey than with vinegar,” “red as a beet,” “that's a hot potato” (i.e. controversial)

#### II. Matching exercise (the page numbers refer to the page in *Tonnerre mes chiens!* where you can find this expression and a longer explanation of its origin and meaning)

##### A. Les animaux Trouvez l'animal approprié pour chaque expression.

- |  |  |                 |
|--|--|-----------------|
| a. un caïman                                 | b. un congo (= <i>water moccasin</i> )         | c. un crapaud   |
| d. bécassine (= <i>snipe, a water bird</i> ) | e. des cornes à boeuf (= <i>cattle horns</i> ) | f. un perroquet |
| g. un cabri (= <i>goat</i> )                 | h. une crabe                                   | i. le taureau   |
| j. une écrevisse                             | k. une jambe de chien                          | l. serpents     |

1. Ça coupe comme \_\_\_\_\_. (*i.e it doesn't cut very well; it's not sharp*) (p. 146)
2. bête comme \_\_\_\_\_ (*as stupid as...*) (p. 75)
3. doucement comme \_\_\_\_\_ (*very slowly*) (p. 122)
4. dormir comme \_\_\_\_\_ (*to sleep soundly*) (p. 62)
5. \_\_\_\_\_ créole (*name for red beans and rice*) (p. 50)
6. rouge comme \_\_\_\_\_ (*very red*) (p. 127)
7. dormir comme \_\_\_\_\_ (*to sleep soundly*) (p. 62)
8. croche comme un baril de \_\_\_\_\_ (*very crooked; very corrupt*) (p. 100)
9. avoir \_\_\_\_\_ dans la gorge (*to be hoarse*) (p. 56)
10. cacher son argent dans \_\_\_\_\_ (*to not trust banks; to not save money in a bank*) (p. 40)
11. apprendre comme \_\_\_\_\_ (*to learn quickly, easily*) (p. 74)
12. C'est pas toi qu'es \_\_\_\_\_ du côteau. (*you're not as great as you think you are*) (p. 33)

##### B. La nourriture Trouvez l'aliment approprié pour chaque expression.

- |                        |                  |                            |
|------------------------|------------------|----------------------------|
| a. un chou             | b. le coco       | c. la farine               |
| d. gâteau              | e. ses oignons   | f. le sirop — les biscuits |
| g. un cochon — le maïs | h. une pistache  | i. la pêche                |
| j. une carotte         | k. un champignon | l. patate                  |

1. connaître \_\_\_\_\_ (to be very knowledgeable) (p. 76)
2. bête comme \_\_\_\_\_ (very stupid) (p. 75)
3. Ça vaut pas \_\_\_\_\_. (that's worthless) (p. 108)
4. tirer \_\_\_\_\_ (to tell a falsehood) (p. 102)
5. blanc comme \_\_\_\_\_ (very white) (p. 121)
6. aimer comme \_\_\_\_\_ aime \_\_\_\_\_ (to love very much) (p. 120)
7. \_\_\_\_\_ de la bande (the prettiest girl in the family/group) (p. 133)
8. en \_\_\_\_\_ (in excess; in great quantity) (p. 142)
9. \_\_\_\_\_ et \_\_\_\_\_ cassent pas égal (things don't always come out even) (p. 148)
10. C'est pas toi qu'as mis l'eau dans \_\_\_\_\_. (you're not as great as you think you are) (p. 32)
11. petit \_\_\_\_\_ (favorite child) (p. 133)
12. au dessus de \_\_\_\_\_ (describes rich people) (p. 40)

**II. Follow-up exercise** Créez vos propres phrases en français!

Exemples: Dormir comme ... *une tortue*. Rouge comme ... *un cardinal*. C'est pas toi qu'as ... *mis l'encre dans le stylo!*

1. Dormir comme ...
2. Blanc comme ...
3. Rouge comme ...
4. Ça coupe comme ...
5. Apprendre comme ...
6. Avoir un .... dans la gorge
7. Aimer comme ... aime ...
8. Connaître son/sa ...
9. C'est pas toi qu'as ...

## ANSWER KEY TO CLASSROOM ACTIVITY

The activities can be found on page 25.

### A. Les animaux

1. ça coupe comme k: une jambe de chien
2. bête comme g: un cabri
3. doucement comme h: une crabe
4. dormir comme a: un caïman OU b: un congo
5. d: bécassine créole
6. rouge comme j: une écrevisse
7. dormir comme a: un caïman OU b: un congo
8. croche comme un baril de l: serpents
9. avoir c: un crapaud dans la gorge
10. cacher son argent dans e: des cornes à boeuf
11. apprendre comme f: un perroquet
12. c'est pas toi qu'es i: le taureau du côteau

### B. La nourriture

1. connaître e: ses oignons
2. bête comme a: un chou
3. ça vaut pas h: une pistache
4. tirer j: une carotte
5. blanc comme k: un champignon
6. aimer comme g: un cochon aime le maïs
7. i: la pêche de la bande
8. en l: patate
9. f: le sirop et les biscuits cassent pas égal
10. c'est pas toi qu'as mis l'eau dans b: le coco
11. petit d: gâteau
12. au dessus de c: la farine