

## Spatial diffusion of language practices within the Catholic Church in Louisiana

This paper reports a case study concerning spatial distribution of the switch from written French to written English in Louisiana over a century and half; it also tests three established models of measuring distribution in explaining our findings. In the *Handbook of Language Variation and Change*, Britain (2002) argues quite convincingly that sociolinguists should pay more attention to the concept of space to understand change or the lack thereof within speech communities and the geographical differentiation of language features and innovations. As Horvath and Horvath (2001 and 2003) have shown, interactions occurring between place and sociolinguistic constraints significantly drive the diffusion of linguistic forms. These scholars have studied the spatial distribution of linguistic forms across a range of localities (cities, regions, countries). Our case study, in contrast, analyzes spatial diffusion of a language practice over time, specifically the switch from French to English in the Sacramental Registers of more than 140 Catholic churches in south Louisiana, from roughly the time of the Louisiana Purchase in 1803 to World War II. This language change in the registers occurred over more than a century, starting in 1844 (the earliest switch) and ending in 1954 (the last switch). In our study, the Roman Catholic Church, with the Archdiocese of New Orleans as its administrative base for the entire Louisiana territory, is defined as a *community of practice*, a conceptual framework advocated by Meyerhoff (2002). During the nineteenth century and the first half of the twentieth century, this community of practice stood as the last vestige of French cultural dominance and the last stronghold for the written French language in Louisiana.

After visually displaying our newly-derived data about spatial diffusion of English records over six time periods, we then test the effectiveness of three geographical models (the wave model, the hierarchical model, and the gravity model) in explaining this data. Although the hierarchical model (which measures the effect of population density) shows that the spread of English as a new language practice first occurred in the few urban centers before 1880, we show that no models can satisfactorily explain its spread afterward throughout the majority of less populated localities within twenty-three parishes. To understand what social and attitudinal constraints lead to place effects, we employ an additional source of data: an unpublished Antebellum collection of business-oriented and personal letters written from 1803 to 1859 by lay people and local priests from Louisiana parishes to New Orleans bishops and priests. The contents of this collection led us to test the effect of Protestant churches within each parish. Using this additional factor, our results now show conclusively that the spatial diffusion of language change in Louisiana Catholic Church is directly correlated to the spatial establishment of Protestant organizations throughout south Louisiana over time. Our results thus suggest both the value of spatial models and the need to include additional sociolinguistic factors in them.