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ENGLISH IN THE MARGINS: CAJUN LITERACY COMMUNITIES IN *BEC DOUX ET SES*

*AMIS*

by

SAMANTHA JAKOBEIT

Under the Direction of Ashley Holmes PhD

ABSTRACT

In this thesis, I will explore the dual language Cajun-French and English comic strip, *Bec Doux et ses amis*, in terms of its value within the literacy communities of southwest Louisiana. I will claim that the text subverts the established power dynamics which existed between the American English speakers, the unreconstructed Cajuns, and the bilingual Cajun French and English speaking communities through the use of text placement and trickster figures.

INDEX WORDS: Multimodal literacy, Literacy events, Oral traditions, Comics

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SAMANTHA JAKOBEIT

A Thesis Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in the College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

2015

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2015

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*AMIS*

by

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Office of Graduate Studies

College of Arts and Sciences

Georgia State University

December 2015

**DEDICATION**

To my family

## **ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS**

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## 1 INTRODUCTION

The *Bec Doux et ses amis* comic strip, which ran from 1969 to 1992 in newspapers throughout southwest Louisiana, is one of the most impressive examples of Cajun identity in fiction. Written as a dual text strip in both Cajun French and English, it catered to an impressive audience base. Because it was published for a considerable period of time, major events, from the women's rights movement to the release of Star Wars, make appearances throughout the series. As a result, its content often provides a window into complex Cajun issues and struggles, and it is one of the few instances of Cajun characters in the comic medium. During its publication, the strip was a much loved text within the Cajun community and is still remembered fondly by many of its readers.

My own position concerning the *Bec Doux et ses amis* comic strip series is complicated; this is largely due to the fact that my father-in-law, Ken Meaux, is the illustrator of the series. However, the difficulties for me are rooted more deeply than family ties through marriage. As a child, I grew up familiar with the term "coon-ass." It was a part of my identity. The term itself is a slur meant to derogatorily describe any given Cajun, but, for me, it was synonymous with my own personal shame for being Cajun. Cajun shame is not an uncommon phenomenon among the members of my generation, a generation bombarded with problematic representations of the Cajun community, like *Swamp People*, highlighting the most unpleasant aspects of a culture filled with both positive and negative qualities.

Therefore, I feel that there is a need to bring Cajun studies under the scrutiny of rhetorically based literacy theory, especially when texts like the *Bec Doux et ses amis* series serve as such a clear meeting point between several complicated literacy communities: Cajun literacy among the working class, academic Cajun literacy in organizations like the Council of the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) and the local universities, and the literacy

of Non-Cajuns living in southwest Louisiana<sup>1</sup>. As a result this thesis will serve as a case study in discourse and power, focusing on the strip as a space for convergence and conflict resolution.

That said, the strip also heralds the shift away from an exclusively oral culture toward a somewhat more homogenously, though in no way simple, literate community made up of new multimodal literacy practices through a mixture of orality and media. Since the comic strip's publication history spans a period too large for the purposes of this thesis, I have focused my research only on the first ten years of the comic strip, discussing the series between the years 1969 and 1979.

### **1.1 Method and Methodology**

I began my thesis research with several major questions: How are the various literacy communities of southwest Louisiana interacting through the comic? How did the strips subvert and/or uphold the pre-existing power dynamics between the literacy communities? How did the policies of CODOFIL impact Cajun literacy? How does the physical space of Acadiana impact the textual space of the comic strip? How does the newspaper, as a space and as a medium, impact the meaning and content of the strips?

In order to answer the above questions, I decided on a mixed research methodology consisting of both archival and theory based research. Specifically, I have compiled archival documents and applied both literacy theory as espoused by Wayne Campbell Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins and Scott McCloud's theories on comics and comic composition in order to analyze to production and content of the strips. In Louisiana, I have chosen to focus on the Kaplan Herald Archive because it houses the original printings of the *Bec Doux* series. The archive is organized chronologically via bound volumes of newspapers. That said, there are no

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<sup>1</sup> These are not the only literacy communities in southwest Louisiana, but they are the major communities that the comic strip engages.

finding aids and none of the newspapers in this archive have been digitized, so I have been working directly with the newspapers and not through another medium (like microfiche or an online database).

In the Georgia State University special collections, I focused my research on the International Association of Machinists and Aerospace Workers (IAMAW) Archives. My major interest is in the membership cards in boxes 55 through 58. My findings allowed me to form a better understanding of the overall situation of working Cajuns in the 1960's and 1970's.

Of course, I have also compiled my own archive. I have collected two Cajun French dictionaries that I analyze in terms of their primary value. Likewise, I have a currently out of print release of the *Bec Doux* series from 1980, containing a unique foreword written by Earl Comeaux. I have also collected, from the Georgia State University Library's storage, an article published in the 1974 issue of *Southern Voices*. The article, written by Lawrence Wright, is titled "In Quest of the Unreconstructed Cajun" and is an excellent example of the sorts of text that represent, or attempt to represent, Cajun identity within the 1960's and 1970's.

The theories that I intend to apply to my work, as previously mentioned, are primarily the community based literacy theory of Wayne Campbell Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins as well as Laura M. Ahearn's Foucault based theory of power dynamics in language. I believe that applying community based literacy theory to not only the comic strip but also the situation surrounding it is a starting point for further research. That said, I have grounded the majority of my historical research in Shake K. Bernard's *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People*, a text that analyzes the shift caused by WWII in the Cajun community. Likewise, Scott McCloud's *Understanding Comics* will lay the groundwork for my definition of a comic and many of my visual analyses of the strips.

## 1.2 Literature Review

Shane K. Bernard's *The Cajuns: Americanization of a People* is a historical treatment of the long process of change wrought in the Cajun community by WWII. He chronicles the impacts of major cultural events: WWII, the Cold War, the declaration of Louisiana as a bilingual state, the formation of CODOFIL etc. He also tackles the problematic ties between CODOFIL and the preservation of Cajun French. Bernard's work provides a comprehensive historical context for my research on the *Bec Doux* strip and complements both Fabrice Leroy's and Barry Jean Ancelet's introductions for *Tout Bec Doux: The Complete Cajun Comics of Ken Meaux and Earl Comeaux*, both of which discuss CODOFIL at length.

In addition to CODOFIL, Leroy also discusses both Zirable and Bec Doux in terms of the trickster motif, and he focuses on their ability to use language in order to trick figures of authority. Ancelet, on the other hand, discusses the dynamics between Cajun and English speakers, claiming that, oftentimes, "many in the Louisiana French community...were reluctant to exclude those around them who did not speak French," so they would switch to English in order to be more inclusive (xxiv-xxv). Unfortunately, this deference to the English language caused an imbalance which ultimately connects to the idea of self-deprecation in the Cajun community. Ancelet then analyzes several strips based on the concept of self-deprecating humor. He claims that many of the moments that Leroy would interpret as trickster language manipulation are actually attempts by the humiliated Bec Doux to "[shrug] off criticism" (xxv). However, both Ancelet and Leroy agree on a very important point: the series was an interesting space between the Cajun community, the English speaking community, and CODOFIL.

The idea of numerous communities within a space is an important element of community literacy theory. Wayne Campbell Peck, Linda Flower, and Lorraine Higgins in "Community

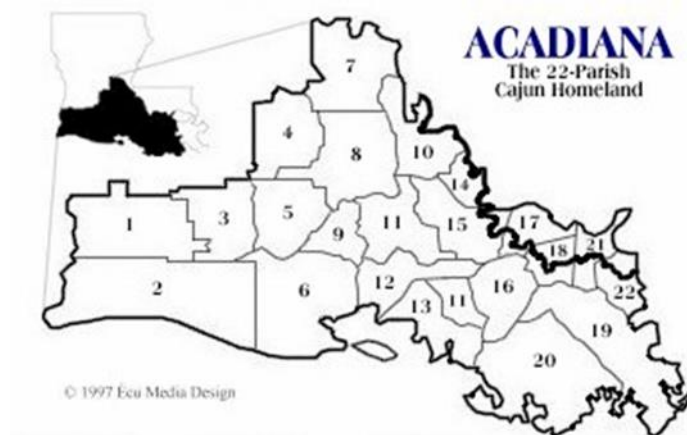
Literacy” discuss this idea at length, defining it as “a search for an alternative discourse.” They go on to claim that “community literacy embraces four key aims”: it “supports social change,” “it supports genuine intercultural conversation,” it “[brings] a strategic approach to this conversation and [supports] people in developing new strategies for decision making,” and it requires “inquiry” (575-6). The problematic aspect of their definition lies in their reliance on awareness tied to their problematic definition of “inquiry.” They believe that inquiry requires the ability to “actively [explore] the logic of how you and I are using our literate practices to make meaning” and that “such an exploration is not done in an atmosphere of opposition or appropriation” (576). However, based on Foucault’s premise that every division implies an imbalance of power, such an exploration would never be possible. Likewise, in order for any minority community to gain enough legitimacy for the majority community to entertain its arguments, then it must both appropriate and oppose. In a Foucaultian sense, the minority group must oppose the majority’s panoptic structure. Thus, I believe that “inquiry” should be used in the more traditional sense of the term, meaning simply to inquire and question—an action which implies opposition.

Lorraine Higgins, Elenore Long and Linda Flower’s definition of literacy has, with its emphasis on social action, clearly evolved from the definition of community literacy stated above. They claim “that literacy should be defined not merely as the receptive skill of reading, but as the public act of writing and taking social action” (9). They go on to assert their belief in “a rhetorically centered model of community literacy as personal and public inquiry,” implying that certain rhetorical ideas and concepts should be applied to community literacy as a whole (10); this idea is reflected in their emphasis on “the potential audiences that might be addressed” (12). However, their definition still leaves much to be desired. For instance, as in the case of the *Bec Doux* series, where is the recourse for the community that is not able to be heard by the

dominant community/ies. I believe that *Bec Doux* is a case in point, addressing issues and concerns relevant to several communities but within a space that allowed the Cajuns to force their way into the conversation—a conversation with two communities that were not necessarily willing to listen: CODOFIL and the larger English speaking community.

### 1.3 Historical Background

From August 14, 1969 to July 15, 1992, *Bec Doux et ses amis* ran in several newspapers in south Louisiana, an area of the state often referred to as Acadiana, or Cajun Country. Acadiana makes up most of southern Louisiana. According to Fabrice Leroy, the strip originally ran only in the *Kaplan Herald*, but it became so popular that several other Acadiana papers began to run it on a weekly basis: *Lafayette Daily Advertiser*, *Breaux Bridge Banner*, *Rayne Independent*, *Crowley Post* etc. (ix).



**Figure 1: Map of Acadiana (Cajun and Cajuns)**

Cajun communities can be found within the Acadiana parishes, between the Western Louisiana border and the outskirts of New Orleans, surrounded by extensive swamps and bayous

which serve as natural barriers<sup>2</sup>. The figure above, from the website “Cajun and Cajuns: Genealogy Site for Cajun, Acadian and Louisiana Genealogy, History and Culture,” is a map of the twenty-two Acadiana parishes<sup>2</sup>, illustrating the extent of the geographical space that defined, and to a large extent still defines, the Cajun community. Lafayette parish is at the center of the map in the section marked “9” and Vermillion parish, where both Meaux and Comeaux lived, is the section marked “6.” The world of *Bec Doux* is defined by the physical space illustrated by this map. In order to understand the importance of space to the Cajun community, it’s necessary to examine a larger Cajun issue, the need to feel rooted to a home. Cajun identity is largely tied to the idea of exile because one of the major unifying events in Cajun and Acadian history was the exile from Nova Scotia in 1755<sup>3</sup>.

The Cajun community has been uniquely defined by its surrounding environment since it evolved out of the Acadian exile. The Acadians were a group of French settlers in Nova Scotia who were forced into exile by the British. Thus, the Cajun community was formed by the act of settling in some of the most difficult terrain in Louisiana after a long and arduous journey. In fact, there are still Acadian people in Nova Scotia and along the eastern United States coast, but they are not Cajun. It was the geography of south Louisiana that formed the Cajun community, and Cajuns pride themselves on being able to thrive in such a harsh environment.

However, WWII also had a major impact on the community in the years leading up to the strip. According to Shane K. Bernard in *The Cajuns: An Americanization of a People*, the community was largely isolated until WWII, one of the major catalysts for the Americanization

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<sup>2</sup> Arguably, Cajun communities can also be found on the Texas side of the Louisiana-Texas border. However, for the purpose of this thesis, I will limit the discussion to Louisiana.

<sup>2</sup> There are maps with a smaller section marked as Acadiana, but the majority of maps mark the area as seen in figure 1. The scope of my research requires that I use the most widely accepted definition of the space.

<sup>3</sup> For more on this topic, see Carl A. Brasseaux’s *Scattered to the Wind: Dispersal and Wanderings of the Acadians 1755-1809*.



of the community as a whole<sup>4</sup>, due to the surrounding swamp-land, land that few besides the Acadians were willing to live on (4). Cajun men returned from the war with a newly expanded ability to write and speak English, and, based on the membership cards in the IMAW Archives in Georgia State University's Special Collections, it is safe to assume that they used it in order to enter the workplace.

Boxes 55 through 58 of the IMAW Collection contain the membership cards of the branch located in New Orleans, Louisiana. Each membership card lists a number of factors concerning the initiate's entry into the organization: his D.O.B. and/or age, his place of birth, his status as a veteran or non-veteran, his date of initiation, his position (either temporary or permanent), and his place of employment. A permanent employee would only need to pay a ten dollar entrance fee while a temporary employee would be expected to pay anywhere between thirty to forty dollars. However, a veteran's fee was waived entirely. Thus, an entire generation of young Cajun men were returning from the war with new literacies to a welcoming job market fueled by the oil industry—this situation was bound to alter their literacy practices and eventually led to the generation of Cajuns creating texts during the 1960's and 1970's. Earl Comeaux, the text writer for the *Bec Doux et ses amis* series, was himself a WWII veteran, eventually entering a career as a high school French teacher (Leroy x).

The 1968 creation of the Council of the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) also further complicates the historical context of *Bec Doux*. CODOFIL, an organization that dictated the ways in which French was eventually taught in public schools across the state, caused a great deal of conflict within the communities of south west Louisiana. In his chapter,

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<sup>4</sup> Interestingly, Bernard also mentions that the reason WWI did not have a similar impact on the Cajun community was due to the fact that many young Cajun men “were discharged from the service because they had contracted influenza” (xx).

“From *Coonass* to *Cajun Power*,” Bernard addresses many of the divides in the culture created by the push to preserve Cajun French and the pull to adopt Parisian French. Prior to the period of the 1960’s and 1970’s, “Cajuns believed that they were indeed a backward people,” and “their ethnicity became a source of shame, something to conceal or discard in the rush toward Americanization and its promise of a better way of life” (87). But, the 60’s brought with them a shift—“something dramatic had occurred to...spark the outpouring of Cajun pride and empowerment that manifested itself by the early 1970’s” (87). That said, language, and by extension literacy, still caused rifts within the community as evidenced by CODOFIL’s methods for preserving French in Louisiana. “Convinced that local teachers were insufficiently trained as French instructors, Domengeaux,” the President of CODOFIL, “imported low-salaried teachers from Canada, Belgium and France” (93). Essentially, this decision caused a rift within the community, alienating Cajun French speakers (99).

CODOFIL is also discussed in Fabrice Leroy’s introduction to the recently released *Bec Doux* collection, *Tout Bec Doux: The Complete Cajun Comics of Ken Meaux and Earl Comeaux*. His article, “Imaging Cajun-ness: The Unique Case of *Bec Doux et ses amis*, is a historical analysis of the strip. In it, he discusses Earl Comeaux’s position “as a French teacher in the Louisiana school system,” claiming that Comeaux must have been necessarily “aware of the language policies of CODOFIL” (x). In fact, he goes on to state that “the short-sightedness of early CODOFIL officials, which would take several decades to correct, can be attributable to an inferiority complex which typically plagues sociolinguistic minorities” (x). That said, Leroy goes on to discuss the content of several of the strips, analyzing them based on Comeaux’s tendency toward the “didactic” and his tendency to lean more toward prescriptive rather than

descriptive language rules (xii). Comeaux was very clearly torn between a desire to preserve the Cajun language as it was and the need to give it structure.

Regardless of the conflicts between CODOFIL and the philosophies behind Meaux and Comeaux's construction of *Bec Doux*, the strip received a warm welcome from the newspapers as evidenced in the flexibility given to the size of the strip. Though I cannot speak for the layout of the other newspapers that ran *Bec Doux*<sup>5</sup>, *The Kaplan Herald* appeared to place little to no size restrictions of Meaux and Comeaux. The strip could oftentimes measure over ten centimeters wide and was rarely consistent. In fact, there was so much thought given to not reducing the strip's size that the September 11, 1969 strip ran vertical along the margin of the newspaper in order to give it ample space. The fact that, from the very first strip, Meaux and Comeaux were given a great deal of flexibility and room to experiment by *The Kaplan Herald* speaks to the willingness of the newspapers to embrace varying viewpoints concerning the Cajun language. On the other hand, the audience response and engagement with *Bec Doux* is far more difficult to interpret and hinges on an understanding of the complicated literacy communities of Acadiana.

In the following chapters, I more fully explore the strip's audience and visual construction. I define the strip's audience based on the local literacy communities that had access to the text, exploring the potential implications of its reader base, while defining literacy communities based on Peck, Flowers, and Higgins' work in "Community Literacy" and Higgins, Long, and Flower's work in "Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry." Likewise, I discuss the implications of text placement as it impacts the relationship between the English and Cajun French languages within the strip using primarily the work of Scott McCloud. I believe that, by focusing on the strip's readers and the relationship between

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<sup>5</sup> The scope of my research did not allow me to explore the archives of the other newspapers. In future, an evaluation of their layout could greatly impact the direction of research concerning this strip.

English and Cajun French within the strip, I will be able to give value to analyzing text audiences based on the concept of literacy communities and to discussing regional comic strips as an important space for cultural and language-based power dynamics.

## 2 CAJUN LITERACY COMMUNITIES AND *BEC DOUX*'S AUDIENCE

According to Higgins, Long, and Flower in “Community Literacy: A Rhetorical Model for Personal and Public Inquiry”: “literacy should be defined not merely as the receptive skill of reading, but as the public act of writing” within the framework of a community (9). This particular definition of literacy can be applied to *Bec Doux et ses amis (Bec Doux)*<sup>1</sup>. *Bec Doux* was, by merit of its medium, both a public act of writing and of reading; it also provided a physical space in which community literacy could take place. The construction of each strip required an act of collaboration between Ken Meaux and Earl Comeaux who were both very responsive to their audience, an audience that often provided feedback. The *Bec Doux* audience consisted of Meaux’s and Comeaux’s friends, relatives, neighbors, and coworkers. Thus, they were in close proximity to a consumer base that would often take part in the dialogue of the strip construction itself. Likewise, the comic strip was very popular, spanning between 1969 and 1992, and was featured in several of the newspapers within the area. According to Fabrice Leroy, the strip originally ran only in the *Kaplan Herald*, but it became so popular that several other papers began to run it on a weekly basis: *Lafayette Daily Advertiser*, *Breaux Bridge Banner*, *Rayne Independent*, *Crowley Post* etc. (ix).

Unfortunately, it would be very difficult to narrow down in what ways the strip was read (private, public, collaborative etc.), but it would not be unreasonable to assume that the potential for public reading was there, as well as the potential for literacy events as defined by Shirley Brice Heath: “A literacy event can...be viewed as any action sequence, involving one or more persons, in which the production and/or comprehension of print plays a role” (445). In addition, the strip very clearly offers the “alternative discourse” that Peck, Flower, and Higgins demand in

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<sup>1</sup> From this point on, I will shorten the strip’s title to the italicized *Bec Doux*, but when discussing the individual character, it will not be italicized.

“Community Literacy” (575). At the time that the strip was written, Cajuns were unable to express themselves in written French, giving them only English or Parisian French as a written language form. Likewise, there were still living Cajuns who had very little oral English skills, let alone writing skills, leaving them largely at the mercy of the English fluent communities (an issue which will be explored later in this chapter and the next chapter). Thus, the literacy offered by the strip serves as an alternative discourse to both The Council for the Development of French in Louisiana’s (CODOFIL) literacy and the English speaking American/Stranger’s literacy. Consequently, it is entirely possible that the strip, with the newspaper serving as its vehicle, could have been used in such a way, providing literacy events in various situations. However, considering the fact that there are various literacy communities at play within both the production and consumption of the strip, the audience must be analyzed in great detail.

The *Bec Doux* readership is very difficult to characterize, so much so that I have started to think of it as a phantom readership—obviously there but difficult to glimpse and understand. That said, both Meaux and Comeaux hoped to reach a large and varied audience—an audience characteristic of the developing southwest Louisiana discourse community which was made up of various literacy groups. In the original, but currently out-of-print, 1980 anthology of the series, *The Best of Bec Doux: World’s Only Cajun Comic Strip*, Earl Comeaux wrote the brief foreword. In it, he addresses the very complicated problem of audience:

For what audience is *Bec Doux* being written? Is it a Cajun, Anglo, or Cosmopolitan readership? Ken and I experimented with *Bec Doux* over the years, and, for that reason, *Bec Doux* was not static, either in language or appearance [. . .]. At this point, however, *Bec Doux* has settled on his place in life. He is a Cajun of the late Twentieth Century who speaks Cajun French and who, hopefully, will amuse audiences of all types.

Ken Meaux and Earl Comeaux wanted to capture a large audience of varying age groups and education. They were attempting “to support” the “genuine intercultural conversation” that Peck, Flower, and Higgins believe is an integral “aim of community literacy” by appealing to the largest of possible audiences—an audience that bridges the gap between literacy communities (575). However, it is important to keep in mind that they attempted to bridge this gap in the face of conflict. Depending on the audience’s position *Bec Doux* could be interpreted either as a self-deprecating expression of Cajun wit and humor or a comedic caricature of their worst traits. This fluidity of negative and positive interpretation plays a large role in the accessibility of the strip and is a necessary aspect of self-deprecating humor—a form of humor that is both self-destructive and self-constructive. Much of the self-deprecating humor seen in *Bec Doux* is rooted in the illustration style.

The stereotypes of Cajun society propagated by not only English speaking non-Cajuns in power but also the self-deprecating humor of the Cajuns themselves, actually provided Ken Meaux with a powerful tool for reaching audiences—caricature. According to Laura Ahern, “Foucault’s notion of power is not a substance but a relation, a dynamic situation; it produces not only constraints on, but also possibilities for, action” (117). Thus, because of the constraints produced by these power dynamics, situations of opportunity are created and can be taken by individuals. In manipulating the stereotypes of Cajuns through the use of caricature, Meaux and Comeaux struck a chord with their audiences.

Caricature and stereotype are two closely related concepts in comic production. Oftentimes, caricature is an appropriation of stereotyped physical traits, as is the case in the problematic rendering of the Imp in Winsor McCay’s *Little Nemo in Slumberland* series. However, Art Spiegelman claims that “with good cartooning, with good caricature, you are

working with stereotypes and giving them the individuation of personality” (27). Caricature may never be an easy concept to navigate within comic production, but it is also unavoidable. The problem of caricature in *Bec Doux*, specifically how it impacts the audience, is not an easy one to solve. However, it could be argued that Meaux and Comeaux use caricature in order to reappropriate the traditionally negative stereotypes surrounding Cajun appearance.



**Figure 2: Excerpted from the August 14, 1969 Strip**



**Figure 3: Excerpted from the August 28, 1969 Strip**

The above images each illustrate the difference in drawing styles between not only two different versions of the character *Bec Doux* but also between *Bec Doux* and two other character



types. In Figure 2, Bec Doux is drawn with less attention to detail but with an exaggerated nose and chin. In Figure 1, he still has the exaggerated nose and chin, but far more detail—he even has a cleft chin and neck kerchief. Bec Doux’s large nose and chin, details that remain consistent throughout the strip’s publication, are an expression of the Cajun community’s perception of their own physical “ugliness.” These facial features fuel a large part of the self-deprecating humor of the strip, as well as Cajun humor in general. In fact, it is the self-perceived “ugliness” of the stereotypical Cajun face that has led to traditions like the Ugly Day celebration in Mamou, LA. (a small town in Acadiana)—a festival in which ugliness is lauded as a virtue.

That said, Bec Doux is drawn with a heavily caricatured style even when compared to the other characters in the strip. This is at odds with most popular comic strips that have a consistent illustration style (like *Beetle Bailey*, *The Peanuts*, *Prince Valliant*, etc.). In Figure 1, for instance, we see Bec Doux contrasted with an English speaking American, or “stranger”. Bec Doux is illustrated with more details than the stranger who is drawn in a very simple style (in fact, if the text were removed and the frames cut away from each other, there would be no indication that they belonged in the same sequence). However, his features are almost grotesque while the American is proportionate to a ubiquitous degree. On the surface, Bec Doux could be interpreted as a stereotypical “ugly Cajun.” But on closer inspection, it is the American who suffers in terms of stereotype—he could be any or all English speaking American(s). It is Bec Doux who has “the individuation of personality” Spiegelman discusses (27). Granted, the American characters throughout the strip’s publication history are not always drawn with such a total lack of exaggeration, but they never match the level to which Bec Doux is embellished. However, this is far more complicated than a dichotomy between English and Cajun-French speaking figures.

In Figure 2, *Bec Doux* is contrasted with a working class Cajun—a blacksmith. Because he is working class, it can be assumed that he is capable of speaking English (although there is little indication of this in the strip itself). At this point, the difference between working class, English speaking Cajuns and Cajuns who are referred to as *bas clas*<sup>2</sup> within their own community becomes obvious in a way that is not apparent in the text alone.

The *bas clas* Cajun is the subculture that Lawrence Wright refers to as “the unreconstructed Cajun” in his article “In Quest of the Unreconstructed Cajun.” It is a derogatory term for a Cajun who has not undergone the process of Americanization described by Shane K. Bernard. The term comes from the larger, more mainstream Cajun community—Americanized Cajuns who have the benefit of English and all that it affords them, namely the ability to enter the work force. Both Meaux and Comeaux are Americanized, or reconstructed, Cajuns. *Bec Doux*, his wife, and his best friend Zirable are representations of a subset of the Cajun community that was left isolated even throughout the trials of WWII. Subsequently, this community within the larger Cajun community became the target of jokes<sup>3</sup> but was also the reason that the Cajun language was able to survive.

It should be noted that Ken Meaux attempted, on several occasions, to introduce more serious comic strips about Cajun culture: *Cajun Facts*, *Louisiana Folklore*, and *The Cajuns*. These strips represented the unreconstructed Cajun in a more favorable light. *Cajun Facts* was drawn in a very similar style to *Bec Doux*, but had serious content and almost a total lack of humor. Both *Louisiana Folklore* and *The Cajuns* were drawn in a more realistic style, similar to *Prince Valiant*. However, *Bec Doux*, with its combination of comedic text and illustration was

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<sup>2</sup> Literally translates to “base class”

<sup>3</sup> The most noteworthy of these are the Boudreaux and Thibodeaux jokes that are told by Cajuns across southwest Louisiana.

the only series to succeed, illustrating the possibility that even those readers who considered themselves to be Cajuns were alienated from a large portion of their own culture—so much so that any return to it required a comedic element.

Unfortunately, it would be nearly impossible to interpret the ways in which the literacy community of the unreconstructed Cajun interacted with the strip because the community itself no longer exists. Lawrence Wright had difficulty finding this community in the early 1970's because there were so few living at the time. The way in which Meaux illustrates Cajun children throughout the strip, even children belonging to *bas clas* Cajuns, is a symptom of the dying community:



**Figure 4: Excerpted from the August 21, 1969 Strip**

In the above image, we see a Cajun child talking to his grandfather, an unreconstructed Cajun. The child is illustrated similarly to the American and the working class Cajun of Figures 1 and 2. Cajun children, by virtue of the fact that they are educated within the paradigms of the English language, are already undergoing the process of Americanization no matter how closely related they may be to the unreconstructed Cajun community. The grandfather, like the earlier discussed illustrations of *Bec Doux*, exhibits a large nose and chin, again the earmarks of a self-

deprecating Cajun humor. He is far more detailed than the boy, making him both more interesting and more isolated stylistically—an apropos visual reflection of the very real, interesting and isolated *bas clas* community. I will discuss the strip that this image comes from in greater detail later in this chapter.

At this point, I can only discuss the ways in which this subculture was used to reach audiences within the larger Cajun community and the outsiders of that community. Whether or not the marginalized “*bas clas*” was actually an audience for the strip is impossible to determine—we can only know that their presence in the space of southwest Louisiana contributed to the construction of the strip. That said, this is certainly not the only audience that the strip may have reached.

The strip’s ability to reach a wide audience is due in part to the layered nature of its text. For instance, although the majority of the *Bec Doux* strips deal exclusively with Cajun culture and literacy, the jokes can also amuse the readers who are unable to understand the nuances of Cajun issues and themes while also educating them on those same topics.



**Figure 5: February 7, 1973 Strip**

The above issue of *Bec Doux* is actually more of a cartoon than a comic strip, with only a single frame, rather than a series of frames, containing the entirety of the joke. Anyone could read this cartoon and find it amusing without knowing anything about Cajun culture. However, for someone living in Louisiana, the added dimension of knowing the difficulties of negotiating a swamp would increase the humor of the joke. Likewise, a native to Louisiana would also understand that Bec Doux has found himself in this predicament because he was unable to read the warning on the sign, written exclusively in English. Thus, it pays for the reader to educate themselves on Cajun issues in order to fully access the humor of the joke. In this way, the majority of the *Bec Doux* strips engage multiple audiences with several layers of textual meaning.

The November 23, 1977 strip illustrates Barry Jean Ancelet's claim that Meaux and Comeaux often "comment on . . . popular culture events," providing the possibility for a greater age range in their audience (xxxix). *Star Wars*, now referred to as *Star Wars Episode IV: A New Hope*, was released in theaters in 1977. As is common knowledge, this was a major event for the youth of America, and Ken Meaux and Earl Comeaux succeeded in using this event as a learning moment. According to Peck, Flower and Higgins, "the writers of community literacy are engaged in the process of constructing negotiated meaning. . . they are building meanings or interpretations in the awareness of multiple, often conflicting goals, values, ideas and discourses" (581). Community literacy requires a complex system of meaning making, resulting in a text that is often conflicting and cohesive simultaneously. In this strip, Bec Doux and Zirable walk into a bar populated by characters from the original *Star Wars* movie: Darth Vader, Chewbacca, and

Greedo. Bec Doux, nervous and sweating, turns to Zirable saying, “Quoi tu dis si on va à une autre place pour notre bière.”<sup>4</sup>

Meaux and Comeaux’s swift reaction to, and incorporation of, *Star Wars* shows an awareness of both Cajun youth and American youth culture as a whole. However, they still manage to appeal to the older generations with Bec Doux and Zirable’s comic and uncomfortable reaction to this new event within popular culture—their decision to vacate the bar rather than to interact with the *Star Wars* characters is a joke accessible to both older and younger generations. In addition, like all of the strips, this one provides the translation. Both the English and French text mimic the colloquial speech patterns of the area as opposed to mainstream, classroom grammar. Thus, we see a large potential in terms of target audience despite what would appear on the surface to be a clash. That said, the majority of their strips represent more inherently Cajun issues while still relying on comedic elements, oftentimes making more violent events and content palatable to the larger audience.

Throughout the series, Bec Doux and his companion, Zirable, are faced with criticism from outsiders of the Cajun community—the English speaking “Americans” or “strangers.” They face this criticism, and sometimes violence, with a sarcastic humor that belies the seriousness of the situation. For instance, in the Sept. 4, 1969 strip, an angry, screaming teacher is attempting to force Zirable to “say two”; Zirable reacts in a way that is both sarcastic and exclusionary. He replies, “mais si c’est tout, j’m’en va’.” The English translation of Zirable’s response is provided in the strip itself: “If that’s all, then I’m going home.” Zirable has misinterpreted his teacher, hearing “c’est tout” instead of “say two.” It is unclear if Zirable has intentionally misinterpreted his teacher, but regardless of his intention he has revealed a very

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<sup>4</sup> “What you say we go someplace else for our beer.”

important power dynamic: the English literate teacher exerting power over a Cajun child who she perceives as illiterate. The result is both fascinating and troubling—Zirable refuses to take part in the dynamic, instead choosing to leave the space entirely. According to Fabrice Leroy, who also analyzes this particular strip:

Zirable’s quick verbal wit and French proficiency become . . . a tool of cultural resistance; they symbolically repair and reverse the standard Cajun narrative of linguistic oppression, which recounts that French-speaking children were punished and humiliated for using their native tongue in school since the 1921 enactment of a new Louisiana Constitution which imposed an English-only policy. (xiv)

Leroy’s analysis of this strip is accurate, and points out a theme that will be revisited throughout the majority of the strip’s publication. According to Peck, Flower, and Higgins, “writers [of community literacy] negotiate (in the sense of arbitrate) the power relations among competing voices as well as negotiate (in the sense of navigate) the best path that tries to embrace multiple, conflicting goods” (582). Meaux and Comeaux depict a situation in which Zirable, when faced with a language that he cannot take part in, reacts in simultaneous defense and offense, attacking his teacher but also defending his language and establishing himself as a subject with agency and power. All the while, the joke helps to diffuse what could otherwise be interpreted as accusation against the English speaking non-Cajun community. This strip, in a very striking way, illustrates the epitome of “negotiated meaning” (582)—Zirable, through his humorous rebellion, is teaching his own language to his authoritarian teacher. Likewise, this same dynamic takes place in the workplace, public streets, doctor’s offices and other social spaces at various points in the series.

The previously mentioned power dynamic continues in the July 7, 1976 strip where it takes on some of the characteristics of bullying. Bec Doux states: “I’m starting a new trend. No

more French, from now on I talk just English!” This declaration is followed by what appears to be a strange grammar lesson taking place between Bec Doux and a Stranger—a figure who Fabrice Leroy interestingly, and I believe correctly, interprets to be a “professor” (xiii). The professor, complete with glasses, tie, hat, and an armful of books, relentlessly corrects Bec Doux’s inability to pluralize the terms “mouse” and “house.” He even eventually calls Bec Doux an “idiot,” while imploring that Bec Doux “speak correctly” and never offering any constructive advice. Bec Doux, in frustration, states: “Next week its [*sic*] back to French for me. I’m just not ready yet to talk that high class English yet!”

This strip is one of the few that offers no Cajun French, and its absence is distinct. Likewise, there is a very real grammar lesson aimed at the audiences—a grammar lesson that both informs about, and pokes fun at, the obvious lack of stable rules for the pluralizing of nouns in a language that sometimes even uses the archaic Old English –ren plural, as in the plural form of “child”—“children.” Bec Doux’s decision to abandon his attempts at English is similar to Zirable’s decision to go home when faced with his teacher’s scolding lesson. Again, the humor of the strip softens the accusation while still allowing the strip to argue a legitimate point concerning the language clash, helping to navigate the “conflicting goods” of working within the English language and legitimizing the worth of the Cajun French language and pidgin English.





Figure 6: August 21, 1969 Strip



Figure 7: August 14, 1969 Strip

That said, the private home also serves as a space where literacies collide<sup>6</sup>. In the Aug. 21, 1969 strip (seen in Figure 5), a young boy goes home to his elderly grandfather, or “Paw-paw”, after learning a science experiment at school. This strip is interesting because no French is spoken until the child arrives at home. Typically, all in frame text in the *Bec Doux* strips is in French, even the text of the non-French speaking strangers, as seen in Figure 6 when the stranger addressing Bec Doux uses French in the frame despite the fact that he is not a Cajun. The strip in Figure 5 is one of the few strips to show how English and French would likely be used by a bilingual Cajun family. The child speaks English outside of the home and does not speak any French until interacting with his grandfather, a *bas clas* Cajun. The child insists on showing the experiment to his “paw-paw,” placing a worm into a bottle of whiskey. Once the worm dies, the boy triumphantly exclaims “do you know what that proves,” and the grandfather says, “Ouais, si tu bois du whiskey, t’auras pas de vers”: “Yeah, if you drink whiskey, you won’t get worms!” This is clearly not the response that the boy was looking for, but it is the only response that his grandfather is capable of giving him because he has been excluded from the literacy through which the boy has learned his experiment.

Oftentimes, the divide between the literacy of American English speaking characters and the literacy of the Cajun *Bec Doux* results in a slightly more disturbing and violent potential within the comic strip. Without the power inherent in the homogenous literacies of the English speakers in the community, Cajuns were faced with situations in which their own power was either taken from them or non-existent to begin with. In the November 26, 1970 strip, *Bec Doux* is in the hospital wrapped in bandages and Zirable is congratulating him (25): “Tout què ’qu’un

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<sup>6</sup> I suspect that this is because the home is also the space where generations collide, causing literacy gaps that are potentially age and education related.

était bien content quand t’as dit à ce grand étranger qu’il avait menti!!”<sup>7</sup> The implication is that, when Bec Doux challenged the stranger’s authority by calling him a liar, the stranger resorted to violence, causing Bec Doux to need hospitalization. Of course this is a very disturbing idea and perhaps not one that would have been easily swallowed by multiple audiences if it had been handled with a more serious tone. Again, the strip manages to balance accusation with humor, effectively creating an audience out of the very community it accuses.

A similar situation occurs in the August 27, 1970 strip. Bec Doux has wrecked his car and exclaims: “Pou-u-u-illate! J’su’s pas assez malchanceux d’avoir mon char tout a’bimé main i’faut qu’ça soit un Américain qui m’aborde!”<sup>8</sup> Meaux and Comeaux, in text provided just outside of the strip, explain that “because many Cajuns in the past were ‘taken’ by fast talking English speaking ‘Americans,’ some still harbor tiny suspicion [sic] about anyone who doesn’t know French.” The explanation is, of course, simple enough. Without the ability to express themselves in text, the majority of the Cajun community was unable to take part in the larger discourse communities, forcing them to rely on the more textually literate “Americans,” like the one portrayed in the strip. This greatly reduced the Cajun community’s ability to take agency within many social situations. The doctor’s office, the courtroom, the school room, and various working environments, spaces that are integral to everyday life and survival, were all minefields for many Cajuns because they were dominated by the English language, preventing Cajun self-expression and self-advocacy. However, in this case, the physical strip itself serves as a space for the “social action” that Peck, Flower, and Higgins call for, not only confronting its American readers with an accusation through the guise of a joke, but also validating experiences common

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<sup>7</sup> “Everyone was real glad...when you called that big stranger a liar!!”

<sup>8</sup> “Doggone it! I’m not [sic] unlucky enough to have my truck smashed but it has to be an American who does it!”

to most, if not all, Cajuns. The strip also avoids showing any actual wrong doing on the part of the American, implying that it is just as likely that the car accident is *Bec Doux*'s fault and softening the blame implied by *Bec Doux*'s exclamation.

Clearly, the strip's relationship with the literacy communities of southwest Louisiana can best be characterized through an understanding of its audience. What makes the strip truly unique is the fact that it addresses real grievances without ostracizing any of its audience communities. According to Peck, Flower, and Higgins, "one can say that community literacy occurs wherever there are bridging discourses invented and enacted by writers trying to solve a community problem" (587); *Bec Doux* is an obvious success in this regard. That said, one of the most unique aspects of the strip is its ability to require the audience to readjust linguistically through a tendency to physically marginalize the English language. The following chapter will be a discussion of the strip's layout with a focus on the text placement.

### 3 ENGLISH IN THE MARGINS

As discussed in the previous chapter, *Bec Doux et ses amis* (*Bec Doux*) engages with both English and Cajun French literacy communities in a unique way, subverting the traditional social preference for English while remaining accessible to monolingual English speakers. Barry Ancelet, in his introduction to the recent edition of *Bec Doux*, describes “the classic formula for a Cajun gathering” (xxv). He states: “take five people speaking in French and add an English-only speaker and you get six people speaking English” (xxv). As a result, it was the Cajun French language that was typically marginalized in social situations.

However, each *Bec Doux* strip contains both Cajun French and English translations, accomplishing what Peck, Flower, and Higgins call for in “Community Literacy”—“bringing into conversation” some literally “unheard perspectives” (575). The strip accomplishes this by forcing both languages to inhabit the same physical space. Additionally, Cajun French is the language of choice for both of the main characters, *Bec Doux* and *Zirable*. Even the language of the characters who only speak English is rendered initially in Cajun French. Thus, Cajun French serves as the dominant language within the space of the strip<sup>1</sup>, appearing in the text balloons throughout the series while the English translation is typically separated from the action of the strip via caption boxes.

In order to fully explore the significance of text placement within the strip, I will apply Scott McCloud's theories concerning the combinations of “words and pictures” in comic strips as explained in his *Understanding Comics* (152). In *Bec Doux* the relationship between the images of the strips and the Cajun French speech balloons are what McCloud would call

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<sup>1</sup> The Christmas strips are some of the few in which the English translations are integrated into the dialogue. For instance, in the December 26, 1979 strip, an American/Stranger asks, in a metafictional gesture, “How ya spell that in French, Earl?” Likewise, another American/Stranger informs Ken Meaux that it “translates to merry Christmas.”

“interdependent.” McCloud claims that this is “perhaps the most common type of word/picture combination... where words and pictures go hand in hand to convey an idea that neither could convey alone” (155). Both the Cajun French text and the images of the strip work in unison to create a story that neither the speech nor the images by themselves could create. However, the translation text cannot be categorized in this way because it exists outside of the very timeline that each individual strip takes up. At best, the translations could be considered “additive,” but only in the sense that they “elaborate on” the entirety of the strip, in-frame text included (154). However, it is this very confusion concerning how to categorize the translations as comic text that helps even further separate it from the strip, illustrating the fact that Meaux and Comeaux, through the use of a caption-box style separation, were able to flip the typical social dynamic as described by Ancelet, effectively making the English translations more visually abstract and the Cajun French speech more concrete by comparison.

Prior to *Bec Doux et ses amis*, Cajun French was a strictly oral language. As mentioned in the introduction, the Council for the Development of French in Louisiana (CODOFIL) focused primarily on forcing Parisian French into Louisiana schools rather than encouraging the use of, or even preserving, the native Cajun French. CODOFIL used their insistence on drafting French teachers from Quebec and France in order to appropriate legitimacy for the language of the Cajun community—the problem being that Cajun French and Parisian French were not the same languages, so the result of importing teachers was further damage to the native language. CODOFIL was, albeit unintentionally, reasserting the power dynamic already at play between the English and French speaking communities as well as the belief that Cajun French had no inherent value.

Unfortunately, the result was alienation. Many “local educators...feared displacement by lower-paid foreign recruits” (Bernard 99), and “children enrolled in CODOFIL programs received only a half-hour of French instruction daily” (100). CODOFIL’s attempts to gain linguistic authority were apologetic, attempting to reconcile with the larger American English speaking community, and perpetuating the idea that Cajun French was inferior. In contrast, the methods used by Comeaux and Meaux, like reducing the focus on the English text by placing it outside of the strip, were unapologetic and uncompromising.

The first Cajun French dictionary to attempt a unified spelling system<sup>2</sup> of the native Cajun French language, *A Dictionary of the Cajun Language* by Rev. Msgr. Jules O. Daigle, was not released until 1984<sup>3</sup>, well after *Bec Doux* began in 1969 and CODOFIL was founded 1968. Daigle states: “Since Cajun<sup>4</sup> has developed as a spoken language, there exists no authentic precedent for the spelling of most of our indigenous Cajun words” (vi). Thus, the Cajun community was left with little to no way of expressing themselves, in their own language, on paper for a large portion of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The newspapers, businesses, and schools of the area depended, for the most part, on English as the language used in written communication.

That said, *Bec Doux et ses amis* was intended to bridge the gap between the dominant literacy community of south Louisiana, the English speakers, and the marginalized literacy communities—the bilingual Cajun and English speakers, and the unreconstructed Cajuns as discussed in the previous chapter. Nonetheless, the strip was still very problematic because, if

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<sup>2</sup> There were earlier attempts at creating Cajun French dictionaries, but they relied on phonetic spellings and are very difficult to find.

<sup>3</sup> Interestingly, the CODOFIL website includes a timeline tracking the development of French in Louisiana. There is no mention of Daigle’s dictionary or *Bec Doux*.

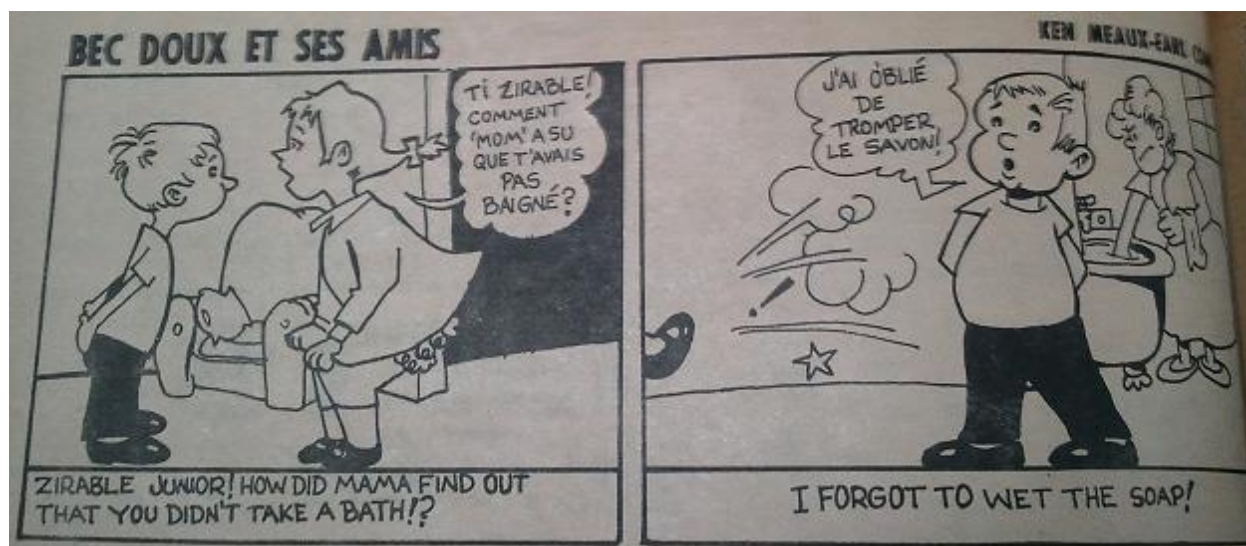
<sup>4</sup> Daigle is a particularly unique Cajun French scholar due to his insistence that the language be referred to as “Cajun,” and not “Cajun French.” In his dictionary, he states: “Cajun is not bad French, nor is it a dialect of foreign French. Cajun is a separate and distinct language in its own right” (xvi). Thus, his dictionary is a prescriptive attempt to create a structured grammar and spelling system, and, in that sense, it was a very ambitious endeavor.

Cajun French was an exclusively oral language, then the Cajun French speakers would not necessarily know how to read the strip. The language would appear just as indecipherable as any other foreign language.

In his forward to the 1980 book release of *Bec Doux*, Earl Comeaux claims that he and Ken Meaux faced a difficult question: “How does one handle the spelling of a language that is spoken, and whose speakers, as a rule, do not know how to read that language?” Fabrice Leroy tackles this issue to some extent in his introduction to the complete edition of *Bec Doux* when he addresses Earl Comeaux’s 1980 forward. He states, “Comeaux sometimes used the phonetic spelling of French words, such as ‘dix pee-ahs’ (7/13/77) instead of ‘dix piastres,’ but this experiment was inconsistent and short-lived” (xi). It can be assumed then that while writing the Cajun French text, Comeaux attempted to give his readers tools for reading by phonetically spelling the language. However, eventually Comeaux moved toward Parisian French spellings (the sentence structure, on the other hand, remained very closely tied to Cajun French sentence structure) for reasons unknown. In all likelihood, Comeaux switched to Parisian French spelling because using consistent spelling when relying heavily on phonetics is very difficult.

The issues with consistent spelling all point to the possibility that even the Cajun French speaking readers could find themselves giving preference to the English translations, going straight to the English, a language with an extensive and familiar written tradition, instead of attempting to read the French text first. It is impossible to make a decisive claim concerning which text the audience preferred, but Comeaux and Meaux’s decision to physically marginalize the English written language by removing it from the strips could speak to this issue. No matter what language the readers preferred, their first look at the strips would have to include the Cajun French language speech bubbles.





**Figure 8: September 28, 1977 Strip**

The September 28, 1977 strip in Figure 1 is an excellent example of the typical text placement throughout the series' run. According to Scott McCloud, text in a comic can be any number of varying degrees between unified and "separate" in terms of their relationship to the images of the strip even to the extent that language can become a part of the image itself (49). How far the text falls toward either end of the spectrum depends largely on the individual comic. In the case of *Bec Doux*, there is a fairly uniform level of text separation. Both the Cajun and English texts seem to have the same level of bold in their lettering (a trait that McCloud places emphasis on in determining the text's integration into the pictures), and both seem to contain content that hints at an "inter-dependent" relationship with the images. Without the image, much of the context would be lost, and without the text, there are so few visual indications of the joke that there would be no clarity. Even so, the English translation is so far removed from the images of the strip, existing in a caption-like box, that I believe it is more abstract than the Cajun text. The English text has very little visual connection to the images of the strip while the Cajun text is wedded to the visuals by the in-frame placement, making it the more concrete of the two texts.

In Figure 1, Comeaux and Meaux made the decision to place the English text at the bottom of the strip. This is, in fact, the case for the majority of the strips. In a very physical sense, they have “[restructured] the conversation” (Peck et al. 575). The audience is forced to interact with the traditionally subordinate language, Cajun French, in preference to the English translation. In other words, the fact that they placed the English translation at the bottom of the text forces the audience to address the Cajun French text first, giving it a power that Cajun French speakers would rarely, if ever, have been given. This decision plays into Foucauldian power dynamics in the sense that Meaux and Comeaux are attempting to help validate an entire discourse community. According to Laura M. Ahearn, “unequal power relations can result in—and be the result of—symbolic violence...which...occurs when individuals mistakenly consider a standard dialect of style of speaking to be truly superior to the way they themselves speak, rather than an arbitrary difference afforded social significance” (111). Cajun speakers had previously been coerced, by organizations like CODOFIL, into believing that their own language was socially insignificant when compared to the English language and Parisian French. When speaking Cajun French in a social situation, Cajun speakers risked judgment and ridicule. Therefore, the imbalance of power was largely the result of a perceived Foucauldian panoptic gaze.

Foucault’s panopticism, as established in *Discipline and Punish*, is based on Jeremy Bentham’s panopticon, a prison designed in such a way that inmates are always under the scrutiny of a controlling gaze. When applied as a metaphor to the larger world, the panoptic gaze occurs anytime a person, or group of people, perceive that someone is watching and judging them based on societal norms and values. Breaking these societal norms and values while under the gaze will result in punishment of some form or another. That said, whether a gaze is actually

occurring is irrelevant—for instance, in the physical panopticon a guard/controller may or may not be in the central tower overlooking the inmates, but there could be someone there at any time. Therefore, even the threat of a gaze is capable of control.

The Cajun community sees itself as being looked upon, and judged by, seemingly superior communities (like CODOFIL and the larger American English speaking community), resulting in the mistaken belief, even amongst the Cajuns themselves, that both English and Parisian French are superior languages when compared to Cajun French. Any attempt to deny the superiority of those two languages could result in very real punishments, like job loss and sometimes public humiliation. Thus, the seemingly simple act of restructuring the comic strip space has resulted in a blatant refusal to accept the idea that the literacy practices of the Cajun community, albeit limited, are inferior to the practices of either CODOFIL or the English speaking community. Instead, Meaux and Comeaux offer a space for community literacy and attempt to expand an already vibrant language that had, heretofore, not been given opportunities for enrichment and growth. However, subverting an established language power dynamic through text placement is tied to a larger theme within the series.

The flipping of traditional language value within the community connects seamlessly to the larger trickster theme of the comic. According to Leroy, “the Cajun minority found a suitable representation in the archetype of the *trickster*, who bends reality in his favor and reverses his precarious position in society through verbal acrobatics (Bec Doux [sweet beak, sweet mouth], as his name indicates, is a *beau parleur*, a sweet talker)” (xv). Thus, we see that Comeaux and Meaux are creating the same sort of language reversal in the structure and format of the comic strip space that Bec Doux creates on a regular basis with his “sweet talk.” The formatting of the strip has actually taken on the same language subverting characteristic of the characters

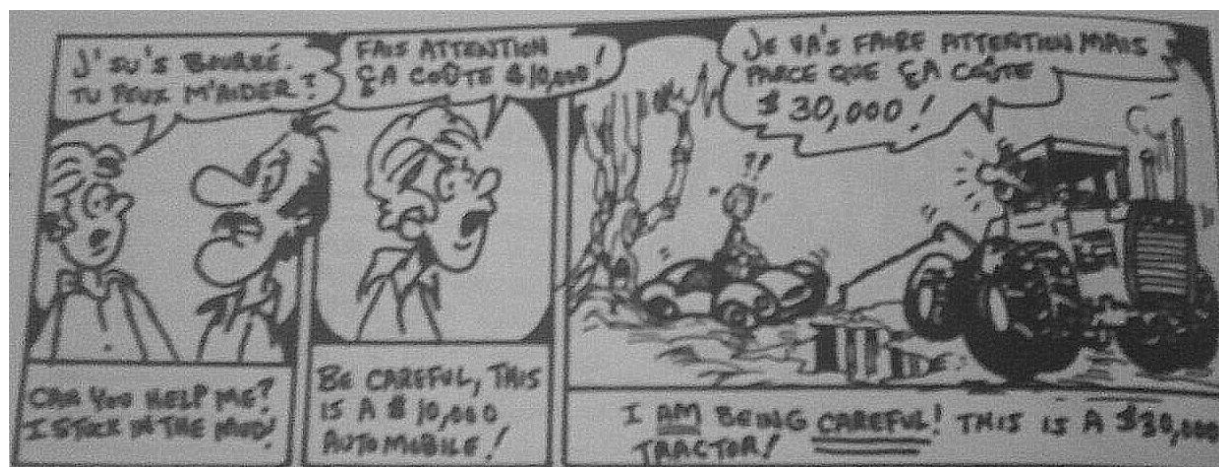
themselves. Bec Doux regularly alters language in ways that give him the upper hand, even in situations where he does not seem to have the benefit of the power imbalance. This will become more obvious as the strips in Figures 2 and 3 are analyzed.



**Figure 9: June 7, 1972 Strip**

In the above strip, Bec Doux is physically abused by his intimidating and stronger wife. The wife yells “Tu savais tu parlais quand tu dormais?” But, in the face of her bullying, Bec Doux replies “Et tu m’regrettes ces ‘quès mots?” He has managed to turn her accusation, effectively using it as proof of her bullying. Bec Doux’s humorous tendency to turn a situation on its head reflects Meaux and Comeaux’s text placement decisions. In almost every strip, the English translation is removed from the events taking place. In the Figure 2 strip, the in-frame Cajun French text appears, like the strip in Figure 1, to tend toward an “inter-dependent” “word/picture combination”. Likewise, there is, again, a separate caption box below the strip itself. Meaux and Comeaux have even included an arrow in order to draw their readers’ attentions to the translation because their initial focus is the strip itself with its Cajun French text. Without the gutters extending into it, the caption box is not divided and the reader is expected to

understand what frames correspond to the translation without much indication. The apparent lack of thought given to the translation's coherency makes it seem as though the English translation was added as an afterthought. There is almost no emphasis placed on it and its readability is low. This is interesting when compared to the similarly designed strip in Figure 3.



**Figure 10: May 4, 1977 Strip**

In the May 4, 1977 strip seen in Figure 3, the translated text is, like the strip in Figure 2, placed below the frames. However, they are designed somewhat differently. Instead of a single caption box, Meaux and Comeaux have more obviously divided the text by including the captions in the frames, giving the translation more readability and taking greater advantage of the gutters. This more clearly associates each section of translation with its corresponding frame and eliminates the need for a visual cue, like the arrow in Figure 2. This also weds the translation more completely to the flow of time in the strip. Leaving readers with fewer questions concerning what in-frame text each translation corresponds with. However, the strip is still very similar to the strip in Figure 2 because the text placement is again complimented by the trickster theme.

Bec Doux agrees to help an authoritative American/English speaker pull his expensive car out of the mud. However, when faced with resistance from the English speaker, Bec Doux manipulates his words. He implies that, if money is the thing which ascribes value to an object (i.e., the English speaker's car), then his tractor is far more valuable than the car and therefore the best tool for retrieving it from the mud. The American is then left in a state of confusion (as expressed visually in the form of exclamation and question marks above his head) because he is unaccustomed to such a complete loss of authority.

Bec Doux, as a trickster, is freed from the fears inherent in a perceived panoptic gaze. In many of the strips (though not all), he neither cares nor worries about the implications of being judged by any given gazer. He also appears only moderately concerned about consequences or punishments, even questioning and subverting characters more directly associated with authority. For instance Leroy claims that, in the December 22, 1976 strip, Bec Doux uses trickster like language "when a game warden arrests him for using an expired hunting license" (Leroy xv). In the strip, Bec Doux states, "mais je chasse que ceux j'ai manqué l'année passée"<sup>5</sup> (130). He seems neither concerned by the game warden's reaction to his tongue-in-cheek response, nor by the gaze of an authority figure. The trickster figure's usurpation of power, and by extension the language flipping of the strip, runs contrary to CODOFIL's strategies concerning the need to appropriate validity for the culture as a whole, instead implying that the culture is already valid. However, the stance of Comeaux and Meaux, as was often reflected by their text placement, was not always consistent.

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<sup>5</sup> "But I'm only shooting at the ones I missed last year!"



**Figure 11: April 1, 1971 Strip**

The above April 1, 1971 *Bec Doux* in Figure 4 is an example of how greatly the strip varied from issue to issue. According to McCloud, a comic is defined as “juxtaposed pictorial and other images in deliberate sequence, intended to convey information and/or to produce an aesthetic response in the viewer” (9). The above image is actually a cartoon. Like *The Family Circus*, Figure 4 consists of only one frame—“there’s no such thing as a sequence of one” (20). The leap between comic strip and cartoon is large and can make analyzing the entire body of the strip throughout its publication difficult. However, this inconsistency in whether Meaux and Comeaux produced a comic or a cartoon could actually be interpreted as a consistency unique to this particular series. Meaux and Comeaux use only the necessary amount of frames for the text. If anything more than one frame is not integral to the content, then they do not expand beyond the single frame, implying that Meaux and Comeaux were impressively concise in their strip production.

That said, the English text placement is strange. Although Meaux and Comeaux seem to prefer placing the English text in a caption box separate from the action of the strip and the Cajun French language preference, they experiment with its placement throughout the early

years of the series, resulting in an occasional equal emphasis. But, even here the English translation is obviously set apart from the strip through the use of a caption-like text box. According to McCloud, “variations in balloon shape are many and new ones are being invented every day” (134). In the above cartoon, the balloon shape is a fairly generic bubble with a tail pointed toward *Bec Doux*’s mouth, indicating that the text within is actually audible speech. The caption box containing the English translation is given no visual indication of audible speech. It is placed away from the speaker almost as an afterthought, crammed into the only space available within the frame. As evidenced by McCloud’s reference to them, caption boxes have a complex relationship with the representation of time in frames (98). The caption box, in this case, indicates text that exists outside of the moment represented in the frame. In addition, the joke involved is actually rather simple—a comment on the sometimes overwhelming strength of Cajun coffee, there are no trickster-like language manipulations here. Even so, the greater majority of strips are similar in theme and layout to Figures 1 through 3.

The text placement of the *Bec Doux* series plays an integral role in the overall theme of the strip. *Bec Doux*, as a trickster figure, manages to subvert the traditional power dynamic as defined by the literacy communities of the area while the strip layout further compliments that subversion. Still, the variance throughout the series coupled with the fact that my analysis of *Bec Doux* does not go beyond the first ten years of the strip only furthers my belief that this series needs more attention within the fields of rhetoric and composition studies. Considering the range of the *Bec Doux* series and my thesis’ limited scope, there is still a great deal of research to be done.



#### 4 CONCLUSIONS

According to Scott McCloud: “Pictures are received information. We need no formal education to ‘get the message.’ The message is instantaneous. Writing is perceived information. It takes time and specialized knowledge to decode the abstract symbols of language” (49). If we interpret the received information images of the *Bec Doux* strips as aiding in the ability of its readers to understand the perceived information of both the English and Cajun French languages, then these strips are able to provide a middle ground. According to Peck, Flower and Higgins, “community literacy means more than simply representing different views in conversation” because “it seeks to restructure the conversation itself into a collaboration in which individuals share expertise and experience through the act of planning and writing about problems they jointly define” (575). *Bec Doux et ses amis* attempts to allow this restructuring to happen, and, essentially, serves as a space for community literacy. Consequently, *Bec Doux*, like other dual language comics, has the ability to cater to several literacy communities simultaneously.

Thus, it should come as no surprise that Meaux and Comeaux found a suitable means of expression in the comic medium as opposed to a more text base form. They allow their audience members of various literacies access to both complex and entertaining ideas while also creating a space for the interaction of multiple literacy communities within southwest Louisiana. Careful analysis of regional comic strips, like *Bec Doux*, can provide a glimpse into local literacy communities. Over the years, Ken Meaux and Earl Comeaux continued to provide a space for the Cajun French language throughout the years, allowing for the sort of discourse that Peck, Flower, and Higgins advocate. The extent of Comeaux and Meaux’s success in bridging the gap between the various literacies of south Louisiana is largely up for debate—even the nature of the strips audience cannot be fully described. However, by defining *Bec Doux*’s audiences in terms

of literacy communities, the mystery behind its readership becomes a little less challenging. The layout of the strip also becomes more understandable.

As previously mentioned throughout the second chapter, the text placement during the strip's publication provides a complimenting visual to the subversive main character while also delivering entertainment for the various literacy communities making up the audience. Although it's no secret that comic strip layout has important rhetorical value, the strip placement throughout the *Bec Doux* series seems to actively upend the local power dynamics rooted in the divide between English exclusive, Cajun French exclusive, and dual language speakers. However, the implications of the variation in text placement throughout the years of the strip's publication warrants more analysis and research than the scope of my thesis allows.

The scope of my thesis, as previously mentioned, was very limited in the face of an extensive, and oftentimes inconsistent, comic strip series with multiple avenues for analysis. In future, I hope to more fully explore the *Bec Doux* series, not only in terms of physical layout, but also as an example of public pedagogy. I believe that my claims in this thesis support the idea of the strip as an example of public pedagogy in action, especially in regard to political action as it relates to CODOFIL. Another possible avenue for future research is the inclusion of interviews with readers of the strip in an attempt to further establish the nature of Meaux's and Comeaux's audiences.

Furthermore, throughout the series, Meaux and Comeaux tackle numerous themes and issues that could advance Cajun studies scholarship. Labor, politics, gender, race, etc. are all viable avenues for analysis. For instance, the strip's representation of gender within the Cajun community, is very problematic and requires a separate research endeavor in order to fully explore the subject. Cajun labor issues also play a massive role in the content of the strips,

shaping a large portion of the jokes and humor. But, on a larger scale, *Bec Doux* can also help provide both a greater understanding of how comics impact and interact with literacy communities and how communities that rely on more than one language for communication can use multimodal texts as a meeting ground for diverse dialogue.

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