

# “The Language of Inclusion”

## thank you University of Maine Jim Bishop

*“The integration of Franco-American community resources into...classrooms by professors Anne McConnell at Saint Michael’s College in Vermont and Margaret Langford at Keene State in New Hampshire, provides us with models of inclusion...” wrote Jean-Pierre Levesque.*

It was a startling moment of disbelief when, several years ago, I felt like an attempt was made to single me out during a conference for creative Franco-Americans. In the audience were professionals, educators, students, Native Americans and authors. To paraphrase the criticism I felt was pointed at me, one of the presenters began speaking about how Franco-Americans must write their own stories. And, then went on to assume how newspaper reporters were not qualified to chronicle the culture’s history.

Fast forward from that unpleasant episode to my nice surprise, when I read “*The Language of Inclusion*”, an article published in the excellent [Le Forum](#) (Spring/Summer 2024), published by the University of Maine’s Franco-Américain.Centre, in Orono and edited by Lisa Michaud.

Un grand merci to retired University of Maine Professor Jim Bishop for finding this article in his academic materials and taking the time to republish in *Le Forum*. I am grateful for his permission to republish this here, including his preface. In my opinion, this essay is the response I wish had been available to me when the critical conference presenter made an assumption about who is qualified to write about the language and the Franco-American culture.

The Language of Inclusion by Jean-Pierre Levesque with preface updated by Jim Bishop:

Professor Bishop: I recently came across an undated piece in my scattered online files written by my old alter ego, Jean Pierre Levesque, published in *Le Forum* some years back. It struck me that Jean-Pierre’s emphatically expressed thoughts on the subject of French language fluency as a marker of cultural legitimacy for Franco-Americans continues to reflect his doppelganger Jim Bishop’s ardent feelings on the subject, in 2024. And that it might be worth reprising Jean Pierre’s statement in *Le Forum* and reflecting how relevant his words might be today.

I yield the floor to Jean-Pierre:

The reclamation and regeneration of our cultural legacy is worth our best efforts, not essentially because we need to preserve a record of our past (though I hope the value of recording a people’s story is self-evident), but because the culture of a people is the expression of its collective soul.

As we lose access to our native forms of expression (I mean here all the intonations, rhythms, and inflections of thought, language, and gesture that make us recognizable to one another and to ourselves), we lose a sense of our belonging, a sense that we are part of a rich and mysterious *histoire* which locates us and establishes the common ground of our being. In this sense I believe we Franco-Americans have come terribly close to losing touch with that *histoire* and in a profound sense with one another. Instinctively, we have addressed that recognition in various ways. Many in

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fact believe that the main work remaining is to collect the story and preserve it before the cultural pulse flatlines and we are absorbed into the oblivion of mass culture. These “preservationists”, let’s call them, tend to treat culture as a commodity, some thing, which can be enshrined and placed in the safe keeping of certain delegated guardians who will ensure it against contamination or corrosion, and which can be put on display on certain high occasions and feast days. The guardians constitute a secular priesthood of sorts who double as keepers of the flame and keepers of the gate. The rule is fairly simple: to get through the gate, you’ve got to look like a guardian, speak like a guardian, and recite ten times vite vite en français The Guardians’ Creed. Excuse là, I indulge myself a bit, but you get the idea: only Franco’s in good standing (French language fluency, proper reverence for THE PAST) need apply. Again, preservation itself is not the problem; it is the concept of culture as artifact, a finished product, and the attendant cul de sacs of the imagination that make this a dead-end street. In particular, I think we have for too long worked against ourselves and actively discouraged cultural and linguistic reclamation by insisting Franco-Americans speak French as a condition of membership in the cultural clubhouse (in academe, we often create a double bind by relegating the North American home tongue to “dialect” (or patois) status and demand “standard” French, long since internalized par nous autre as “the good French”). I focus here on linguistic issues of Franco’s in the United States; the linguistic practices and policies of France or Québec emerge from quite separate socio-political contexts and need to be addressed on their own merits. While I understand of French-only provisos, I observe that they are generally counter-productive in that they exclude the participation of large numbers of Franco’s who do not have access to their ancestral tongue but who could enlarge the cultural dialogue with their presence and who themselves would be more empowered to reclaim their tongue were they not treated as second tier Franco’s by their enfranchised compatriots. We continue to hear from French teachers in public schools and at the university level in the northeast that enrollment in French classes is shrinking and that a number of French programs are threatened.

Part of this can be attributed to the rapid growth of enrollments in Spanish classes, reflecting demographic changes. But I think we also need to ask ourselves if we are making the best use of the cultural resources available to us. I think immediately in this regard of pioneer work done by people like Éloïse Brière at SUNY Albany, with the Franco community of Cohoes, New York. And of the model course designed and taught by Kathryn Slott and Yvon Labbé, at the University of Maine in Orono, which focused on plays written in North American French and which encouraged the Franco-American students in the group to converse and create in their home French as a legitimate and rich resource.

The integration of Franco-American community resources into their classrooms by professors Anne McConnell at Saint Michael’s College in Vermont and Margaret Langford at Keene State in New Hampshire also provides us with models of inclusion\*. All too often, though, French departments continue to teach and regard French as a “foreign” language and to either ignore surrounding Franco communities and Franco students in their own classes or to think of them as

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remedial problems to be upgraded. I suggest that we begin to trust the power of culture and of language to renew themselves if given half a chance.

When the people of French Island in Old Town, Maine, got together to create an oral history of their place (“[Nos Histoires de L’Ile](#)”), they did not stipulate that the organizational meetings must be held in French, or that the interviewers must be fluent in French or that only those who had mastery of the language should be interviewed.

Had this been the case, the project would automatically have excluded certain Franco’s who have been instrumental to the success of the project. In point of fact, the project may not have happened at all. But because the organizing committee chose, instead, to accept each volunteer on his/her own linguistic terms, the project continues to generate energy in the community almost two years after its inception and expanded way beyond its original goals. A recent spinoff of the project (Guardians, take note) is the spontaneous formation of a community French language table, the first meeting of which will be held next week (as I write) at that venerable neighborhood institution, The Shuffle Inn. The fate of the French Island language table remains to be seen (stay tuned). What is already clear beyond reasonable question is the power of community inclusion to generate energy, to create new directions and purpose in people’s lives, and to jumpstart the process of cultural and linguistic regeneration without resorting to the imposition of language requirements. I want to end my little discourse with a few words about words. One word we see a lot in academic circles these days is “francophonie”. I understand the word to have international political significance, which I don’t want to get into here. But I also hear the word used, by French teachers and professional Franco’s in particular, to designate the community of Franco’s in this country and on this continent who appear to be worth our attention and who deserve to be included in serious academic dialogues. I have even seen the word used almost synonymously with “Franco-Américanie”. It’s enough to make me want to list my ethnicity as Canuck, which, whatever its original pejorative connotations and its unfortunate effect on Edmund Muskie’s Presidential ambitions, has the advantage of organic origins and therefore retains some point of contact with the stuff of life. Maybe those of us, the great unwashed, who do not aspire to guardianship, but who know ourselves to be Franco to the marrow, should start a Canuck Alliance.

Or maybe, without naming it, we already have. Seriously, we need as children de la meme histoire to stop inventing mechanisms that serve to set us apart and find ways to draw from the deep well we commonly inherit. This is no time to be checking passports. It’s time to be reimagining our home.

\*Professor Margaret Langford is a cultural advocate although not a native speaking Franco-American.