

French: A language fashioned by diversity

By Jean-Guy Bruneau

Vas chercher la malle? J'peux pas.

And from Acadia, the famous, *J'avons voulu.*

Are these anglicisms, examples of poor French? And yet ...!

Why do some words survive over time while others disappear? What defines French in Canada, in Quebec, in Acadia, in Ontario or even in Paris? What are the engines of change socially and linguistically? How do we distinguish between archaisms, anglicisms and innovation?

These are just some of the questions that might be answered through a major research project entitled *Modéliser le changement : les voies du français*. The project will explore the remarkable variety of the forms of French over time.

“We want to examine how our language was fashioned over the centuries, starting from French in Canada at the time of the conquest of New France back to its origins in the Middle Ages,” explains France Martineau, professor and principal researcher for the project.

The project is made possible through a \$2.5 million grant from the Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada (SSHRC). The funds will be allocated over five years and the project will bring together 40 researchers, 11 co-researchers from seven different universities and 28 collaborators from all over the world. Great Canadian archival centres are essential partners in the project.

“It is false to think that French has only one source,” explains Martineau. The idea of French as the language of the motherland, in this case France, spreading

throughout all foreign communities that use it, is a notion that no longer holds water. “The history of the French language in Canada is not simply a digression,” insists Martineau. “It is at the very heart of the history of French.”

In fact, French has always developed in diverse environments. Since the Middle Ages, French has been shared by a number of dialects (Picardy, Walloon, Lorraine, Burgundy and others) and has a long history of sustained relations with English. The word *malle* that we easily associate with the English word *mail*, is in fact a French word used frequently in the eighteenth century and was borrowed by the English language. If Acadians today use the colloquial *j'avons*, it is because the first settlers brought it with them, in contrast to Quebec settlers who, for the most part, came from different provinces. Sometimes history followed a parallel course on both sides of the Atlantic, as in the famous *ne* in the expression *J'peux pas* that began to disappear

at the same time in France and Quebec in the nineteenth century.

The research project aims to create a completely digital textual database of some 10 million words (letters to parents, literary, legal and notary documents) that, using state-of-the-art computer technology, will help identify the sources and evolution of linguistic changes and identity.

Researcher contributions represent several disciplines including linguistics, literature, history, geography and computer science. This multidisciplinary approach will help place the linguistic changes in context.

The research project will give an overall view of the evolution of French, concludes France Martineau. “When we understand the ‘why’ we are then in a position to make choices. It is the same for the evolution of our language.” ■

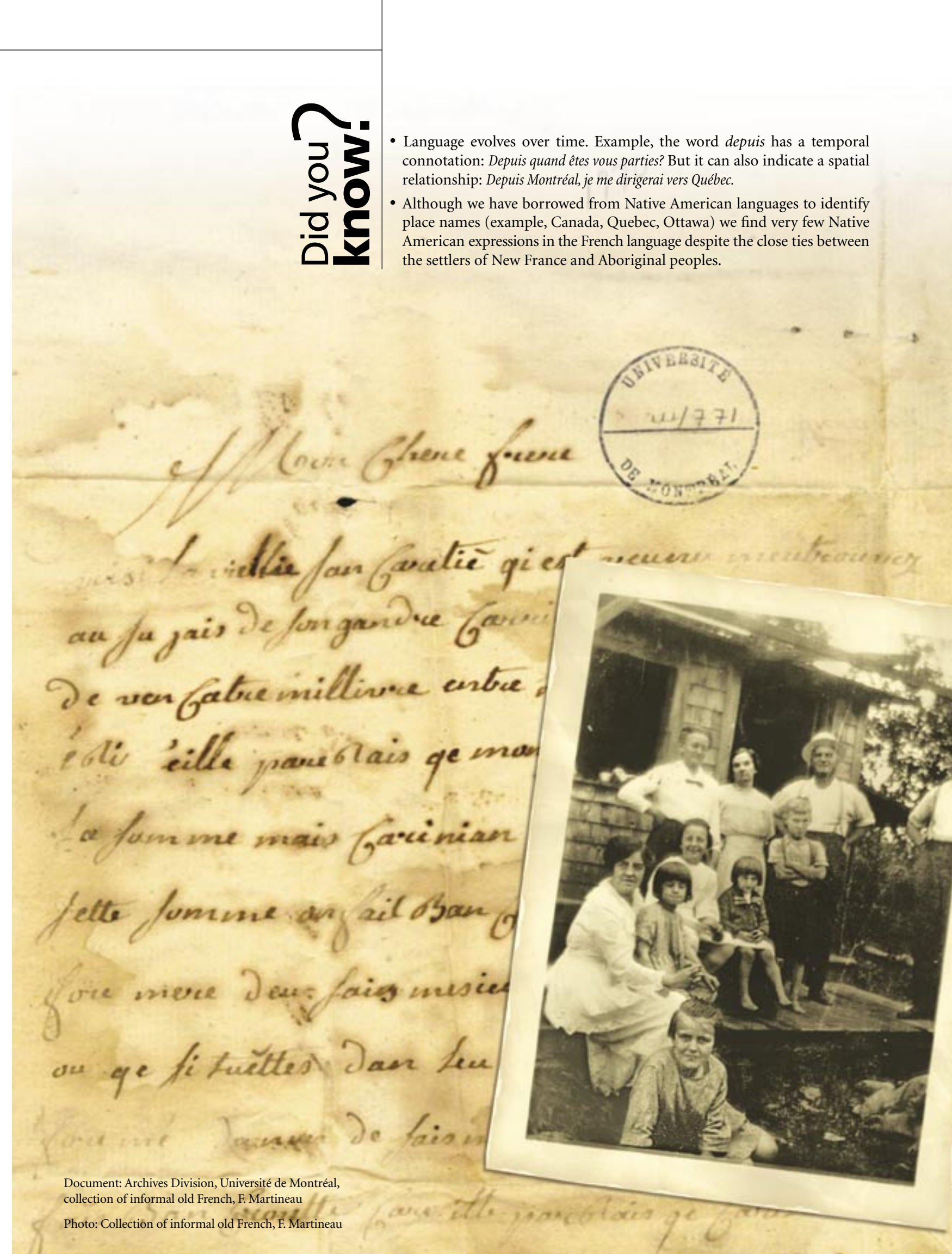
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Did you know?

- Language evolves over time. Example, the word *depuis* has a temporal connotation: *Depuis quand êtes vous parties?* But it can also indicate a spatial relationship: *Depuis Montréal, je me dirigerai vers Québec.*
- Although we have borrowed from Native American languages to identify place names (example, Canada, Quebec, Ottawa) we find very few Native American expressions in the French language despite the close ties between the settlers of New France and Aboriginal peoples.



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Document: Archives Division, Université de Montréal, collection of informal old French, F. Martineau

Photo: Collection of informal old French, F. Martineau