Maintenance of Chiac in the Face of Competing Pressures

Michelle Sowey

Introduction

Chiac is a French-English mixed language that arose in the 1960s among youth in the Moncton area of New Brunswick, Canada's only officially bilingual province (King, 2008, p. 138). The linguistic characteristics of Chiac are the result of intensive contact between French and English speakers (Gadet & Hambye, 2018, p. 728; Leclerc, 2005, p. 164). On the Expanded Graded Intergenerational Disruption Scale, Chiac is at Level 5 ('Developing'), i.e. "in vigorous use, with literature in a standardized form being used by some though this is not yet widespread or sustainable" (Eberhard, Simons & Fennig, 2025).

The question of language maintenance is particularly interesting in the case of Chiac, which is itself a product of language contact and shift. While there is no consensus within the regional community about whether to actively maintain Chiac—and no clear 'top-down' approach to its preservation—grassroots initiatives and attitudes tend, on balance, to favour its vitality. Below I introduce Chiac and its rich sociolinguistic context, before exploring the various pressures influencing its maintenance.

The disputed nature of Chiac and its relationship to other regional varieties

The nature of Chiac is contested. Some researchers describe it as a fully fledged hybrid language that is autonomous (Perrot, 1995, p. 81) or in the process of becoming so (Arrighi, 2020, p. 105). They emphasise Chiac's exceptional degree of stabilisation, that is, the highly predictable recurrence of English elements in its Acadian French matrix (Boudreau & Perrot, 2005, p. 8; Kasparian, 2003, p. 160). Other scholars refer to Chiac as a 'code', 'vernacular', 'dialect', "stigmatised variety of Acadian French" (King, 2008, p. 137), or some variant of these descriptors, e.g. "fossilised mixed code" (Papen, 2014, p. 154); "fused lect" (Lüdi, 2006, p. 27); or "hybridised and … codified urban dialect" (Papen, 2014, p. 156). When Perrot investigated perceptions of the relationship of Chiac to French among students at a Moncton area francophone high school, she uncovered a spectrum of views, including that Chiac isn't French at all due to its anglicisms, that it remains French despite these anglicisms, that it represents a degenerate form of French, or that it constitutes a distinctive French variety expressing a unique identity (Perrot 2006, p. 146).

Notwithstanding this range of views, researchers agree that most Chiac-speakers regard their language as a variety of Acadian French (Papen, 2014, p. 180; Perrot, 2006, p. 144). It is therefore somewhat paradoxical that public discourse presents Chiac as a *threat* to Acadian French (Leclerc, 2005, p. 164). To make sense of this apparent contradiction, it is important to understand that Chiac exists in a regional context where there is strong pressure to preserve French, either in an Acadian vernacular form, or in a standard form that more closely resembles French in France (Vernet, 2022, p. 47; Voisin, 2016, p. 103). That Chiac represents a language shift away from these older forms (Leclerc, 2005, p. 164) accounts for it being perceived as a threat by language purists (Bouchard, 2025, p. 4).

Chiac in Context: The Struggle to Preserve French in New Brunswick

Chiac must be understood in the context of the pressure to preserve French, a pressure arising from various factors: demographic conditions, historical circumstances, prescriptive language attitudes, and official concern about the decline of French.

Demographically, francophones are a linguistic minority, constituting about one-third of New Brunswick's population, a figure that is slowly declining due to urban migration patterns (Statistics Canada, 2023). The province's majority language, English, is culturally hegemonic. In response to what Vernet (2022, p. 48) describes as "the double minorization of Acadian French", francophones in New Brunswick exhibit twofold resistance to assimilation: They resist both English, Canada's dominant language, and Quebecois, Canada's dominant variety of French (Fédération de la jeunesse canadienne-française [FJCF], 2020, p. 6; Voisin, 2016, p. 108). Francophones are therefore engaged in a continual struggle for status and recognition (Voisin, 2016, p. 102).

The Acadian French of New Brunswick are a historically persecuted group, their ancestors having been deported by British colonialists during The Great Upheaval of the mid-18th century (Keppie, 2011, p. 224). For more than 200 years, Acadians lived without legal recognition of their status as a linguistic community (Arrighi, 2020, p. 98). This traumatic history strengthened the resolve of survivors to preserve their language variety, a determination shared by many of New Brunswick's francophones today. In the words of one celebrated Acadian author: "Lacking an established territory over which we could govern ourselves … the existence of our language has become the ultimate record of our unique history and culture … any erosion of our French feels like an erosion of identity" (Daigle, 2017).

Prescriptive language attitudes remain prevalent in New Brunswick. Schools teach a global standard French in accordance with the "standard language ideology" (Bouchard, 2024, p. 431) which endorses the myth of a single legitimate language variety. The standards of language purity imposed by schools are often unattainable (Voisin, 2016, p. 111), and teachers are encouraged to enforce French-only policies through corrective practices, including prohibiting language mixing and punishing the use of English (Bouchard, 2024, p. 442). The media and other cultural institutions also play a role in disseminating the normative standard (Vernet, 2022, p. 47). Despite occasional public acknowledgement of the heterogeneity of Canada's francophone community (FJCF, 2020, p. 6; Humbert, 2023, p. 409), Acadian French speakers experience pressure to strategically converge on an international norm (Marshall, 2016, p. 77).

Although English and French have had equal legal status in New Brunswick since the *Official Languages Act* (1969), there is official concern about the decline of French, as evidenced in Charter Statement C-13 (2022) regarding amendments to the Act, where French is recognised as vulnerable and in need of protection. This echoes the findings of a previous report, produced for the Commissioner of Official Languages for New Brunswick, which identified the gradual decline of French as a "worrying trend" (Pépin-Filion & Guignard Noël, 2018, p. 12).

Bearing in mind these contextual factors, I now consider various pressures that weigh against Chiac, before turning to factors that support its maintenance.

Pressures Against Chiac Maintenance

Dominance of English

The prevalence of English, which dominates in New Brunswick, is a relentless source of pressure against Chiac (Gadet & Hambye, 2018, p. 728), as English remains the majority language both numerically and sociopolitically. Well over twice as many New Brunswickers speak English as a first language than French as a first language (Statistics Canada, 2024). Outside the specific regions in which the francophone population is concentrated, French speakers need to be bilingual, while many English speakers can remain comfortably monolingual in business and government transactions (Pépin-Filion & Guignard Noël, 2018, p. 23). Even in Moncton, which has a thriving francophone community, English dominates commercial signage (Perrot, 2006, p. 141). English therefore poses a clear assimilative threat to all French varieties, including Chiac, which may be regarded as especially vulnerable given its reliance on English loan-words. One can imagine a progressive expansion of these borrowings to the point that Chiac becomes subsumed into English.

Stigmatisation of Chiac and Concomitant Linguistic Insecurity

Over the decades, Chiac has been heavily stigmatised due to its incorporation of anglicisms (Arrighi, 2020, p. 113; Voisin, 2016, p. 109). Many New Brunswick francophones still regard Chiac pejoratively (Keppie, 2013, p. 329), describing it as a "language of mediocrity" (Pellegrino, 2023, p. 41) with a "bad reputation" (Arrighi, 2020, p. 114).

While attitudes appear to be changing, in some quarters Chiac continues to be regarded with suspicion as "a step toward assimilation" (Arrighi, 2020, p. 114) or condemned as an impure and illegitimate version of Acadian French, tainted with English (Riley, 2017, p. 372). As one French-speaker from the Acadian Peninsula indicated in a survey response, "'je crois que nous pouvons pas mélanger deux langues ensemble' ['I think we can't mix two languages together']" (Voisin, 2016, p. 109). In another sociolinguistic study, a member of Moncton's francophone arts scene observed that people from other regions of French Canada attend to Chiac-speakers' manner of speaking rather than their message, a tendency that undermines perceptions of Chiac as an authentic variety of French (Marshall, 2016, p. 72). Negative attitudes to Chiac continue to adversely impact its speakers, including through the censorship of Chiac texts, which alienates Chiac-speakers from the expression of their own culture (Boudreau & Perrot, 2005, p. 13, citing Louise Péronnet).

The stigmatisation of Chiac is typical of the views of francophones from New Brunswick's north-east, for whom Chiac has low prestige (Keppie, 2008, p. 244; Lüdi, 2014, p. 75). This judgement is reflected in divergent self-evaluations of the French varieties spoken in the relevant regions. Voisin's (2016) study revealed that in the Moncton area (where Chiac is increasingly prevalent), over 50% of francophones rated their French as inferior to international French, a rate twice that of francophones in the Acadian Peninsula, who experience less linguistic insecurity. Chiac speakers tend to denigrate their own language variety even while speaking it (Voisin, 2016, p. 111).

Prejudice against Chiac accounts for the striking degree of linguistic insecurity experienced by Chiac speakers. As Bouchard (2024, p. 428) explains, this insecurity

manifests as "discomfort or anxiety when speaking [which] can lead to a loss of confidence… and eventually to the erosion of [language-specific] knowledge and ability". The impact can be profound: Many Chiac-speakers feel judged or ashamed of their speech, and in some instances, their fear of shame or negative judgement reduces them to silence (Humbert, 2023, p. 407). In censoring or modifying their speech, Chiac-speakers suppress aspects of their identity (Perrot, 2006, p. 142).

Privileging of Other French Varieties

Another formidable source of pressure on Chiac is the systematic privileging of other French varieties. This is evident in the institutional promotion and legal protection of a normative standard French, typically regarded as key to connecting with the broader French-speaking world (Boudreau & Perrot, 2005, p. 17). Privileging of other varieties also manifests in a preference for standard Acadian over Chiac everywhere but in the Moncton area.

The very intelligibility of Chiac has been called into question, with some New Brunswick Acadians reporting communication difficulties with the use of Chiac, particularly in professional contexts (Keppie, 2008, p. 199; Voisin, 2016, p. 107). Similarly, literary works in Chiac have on occasion been publicly spurned (Boudreau & Perrot, 2005, p. 13) and dismissed as pushing the limits of intelligibility (Leclerc, 2005, p. 173; Marshall, 2016, p. 77). These multiple layers of pressure have tended to marginalise Chiac.

Monoglossia in the Francophone Education Sector

Nowhere is this marginalisation more conspicuous than in the education system, where Chiac is excluded from textbooks and classroom discourse (Boudreau & Perrot, 2005, p. 19). This aligns with a broader tendency of Chiac to be restricted to informal registers (Voisin, 2016, p. 110). Admittedly, there are some individual teachers in francophone schools across bilingual Canada who understand language variation as normal, and who accommodate students' use of different varieties of French—"the rainbow of the Francophonie"—in order to foster linguistic security and self-expression (Bouchard, 2024, pp. 439–448). However, as discussed above, a monoglossic language ideology still prevails at a systemic level in francophone schools, with punitive measures enforced if students breach language policies (Bouchard, 2024, pp. 442–443).

Institutional rigidity is met with resistance and sometimes rebellion by Chiac-speaking students, who feel exasperated by the strict enforcement of standardised French which they perceive as tyrannical (Boudreau & Perrot, 2005, p. 18). Their frustration is heightened by a sense that French is only policed in order to protect against English dominance, and yet the students themselves perceive no threat from English. For instance, many students make remarks such as "'on va *still* parler en français' ['we're still going to speak in French']" and "'c'est pas comme si qu'on va s'arrêter' ['it's not like we're going to stop']" (Perrot, 2006, p. 147). They plead for linguistic freedom—"'parler la *way* qu'on veut' ['to speak the way we want']" (p. 148)—and express defiance of language restrictions.

Scholars agree that official insistence on a normative standard French is ill-suited to the sociolinguistic complexity of the Moncton region (Boudreau & Perrot, 2005, p. 13). Teachers who are aware of this complexity report feeling torn between honouring the identity function of their students' natural way of speaking, and providing students with

access to a standard variety that will enhance their educational and employment opportunities (Boudreau & Perrot, 2005, p. 18). Consequently, they develop nuanced criteria for permissible language use, such as: "A linguistic practice that is considered a borrowing can be tolerated… [whereas] a linguistic practice that is considered an Anglicism must be penalized" (Vernet, 2022, pp. 54–55). Some teachers show considerable sensitivity in striving to 'correct' students without causing insult or offence—for instance by using gentle humour or discreetly echoing students' Chiac expressions in standard French (Boudreau & Perrot, 2005, p. 17). Still, institutionalised monoglossia remains a powerful source of pressure against Chiac.

Factors Supporting Chiac Maintenance

Despite the various pressures described above, Chiac has come to be normalised and even valorised as an enriched variety of French—indeed, the sign of a robust francophonie (Arrighi, 2020, p. 115). Here I explore Chiac's resilience with reference to pride and cultural identity as well as its increasing dissemination through arts and media.

Pride and Cultural Identity

Various studies indicate that Chiac is now emerging from the shadow of stigmatisation (Leclerc, 2005, p. 165; Voisin, 2016, pp. 105–106). Over the past two decades, Chiac has been viewed increasingly favourably (Keppie, 2008, p. 60) and has been enjoying a burgeoning (albeit still covert) prestige among its speakers (Perrot, 2006, p. 150; Voisin, 2016, p. 110). Chiac is being reclaimed as a way for speakers to "fight back against dominant language ideologies, assert their linguistic security, and claim the legitimacy of their language variety" (Bouchard, 2024, p. 432). On this view, speaking Chiac is a countercultural or even counter-hegemonic act (Keppie, 2008, p. 244; LeBlanc & Boudreau, 2016, p. 97).

The pride taken by Chiac-speakers is a testament to the importance of Chiac as a cultural marker that affirms a distinctive identity (King, 2008, p. 173; LeBlanc & Boudreau, 2016, p. 104; Perrot, 2006, p. 147). Recognising this identity value, some teachers at francophone schools have been willing to contravene restrictive language policies, choosing instead to praise the linguistic diversity inherent in Chiac. These teachers bolster the status of Chiac by engaging in what Vernet (2022, pp. 61–62) calls "meliorative discourse": a kind of "protecting balm" that defends against both linguistic insecurity and monoglossic language ideology. This approach may be effective in boosting the vitality of Chiac, as exemplified by one Moncton teacher's observation that there is little difference between the Chiac that students speak in the corridors and the language they use in the classrooms (Boudreau & Perrot, 2005, p. 14).

Further support for Chiac language and identity emerges from the University of Moncton, which has long been active in the struggle for language rights. Its vibrant applied linguistics research program has a strong record of investigating Chiac's evolving usage (Boudreau & Perrot, 2005, p. 8).

Chiac-speakers commonly allude to "Chiac culture" (Voisin, 2016, p. 109), indicating the presence of extralinguistic cultural touchstones. Speakers share a sense of belonging to a group with its own proud traditions (Pellegrino, 2023, p. 37) and a sense of solidarity in resisting the dominant cultures of New Brunswick (Keppie, 2013, p. 329). Pellegrino

(2023) emphasises the appeal of Chiac among young people and suggests that it represents "the essence of a generation of Canadians eager to express themselves in an alternative way" (p. 37). Yet while Chiac remains predominantly a young person's language, it is not essentially a generational phenomenon, but rather a symbol of regional identity (Gadet & Hambye, 2018, p. 728; Keppie, 2013, p. 329): an emblem of a mixed culture forged by intensive contact and legitimised by forces of globalisation (Gadet & Hambye, 2018, p. 733; Leclerc, 2005, p. 165). Chiac remains somewhat enigmatic in that it upholds "a local Francophone identity while at the same time weaving itself into the cloth of an English-dominated global culture" (Leclerc, 2005, p. 167).

Usage in Arts and Media

The many cultural institutions concentrated in Moncton provide a public platform for Chiac, and serve to increase its visibility and perceived legitimacy (Boudreau & Perrot, 2005, p. 8). Novelists, poets, singers and local media representatives, who use the French-English hybrid to demonstrate their cultural specificity (Leclerc, 2005, p. 165), have all helped to establish Chiac as a fixture in the linguistic landscape (Perrot, 2006, p. 141).

Chiac is frequently heard in the speech of radio broadcasters in the Moncton region (Boudreau & Perrot, 2010, p. 51; Leclerc, 2005, p. 166). Additionally, a clear majority of Moncton residents surveyed by Voisin (2016, p. 108) reported regularly seeing Chiac in written form—a striking finding, considering that Chiac is primarily an oral variety. Chiac has gained a degree of acceptance in Acadian literature in recent years (Voisin, 2016, p. 111), in contrast with its cold reception in previous decades when francophone readers were unaccustomed to seeing minority sociolects in literary texts (Leclerc, 2005, p. 172).

The author France Daigle—who regards Chiac as not merely a language but a state of mind (Cabajsky, 2014, p. 252)—frequently employs Chiac in the dialogue of her fictional characters (Leclerc, 2005, p. 172). Jean Babineau goes further: In his novel *Vortex*, he endows not only the characters but also the narrator with Chiac, "a courageous choice that dispels the myth of Chiac as [an exclusively] vernacular language" (Pellegrino, 2023, p. 39). Other celebrated literary writers such as Gérald Leblanc and Herménégilde Chiasson use Chiac in an activist or even subversive spirit, as a means to express the modern, urban culture of contemporary Acadia (Leclerc, 2005 p. 165). In his novel *Moncton Mantra*, Leblanc describes Chiac as "an original symbiosis" and celebrates "the music of this language, the music of the experience of the city … the pleasure of using our own words, the language of our own reality" (Leclerc, 2005, pp. 168–169, citing Jo-Anne Elder's translation).

Musical artists such as Marie-Jo Thério and Lisa LeBlanc have similarly legitimised Chiac by incorporating it into their songs (Gadet & Hambye, 2018, p. 728). A member of the Acadian hip hop trio Radio Radio, known to rap in Chiac, recounts his defiance of school language regulations as follows: "'A teacher in French said, "you can't say that, it's not a word." So I wrote it down, and then I put it in a song, and then it's published, so … it's a word now'" (LeBlanc & Boudreau, 2016, p. 96). The maintenance of Chiac is therefore, at least in part, the result of intentional acts of resistance.

Digital media have also boosted the vitality of Chiac, which now flourishes across blogs, YouTube, social media platforms, and television programming. These and other modes of

cultural production have, in recent decades, afforded Chiac a more global visibility (Leclerc, 2005, p. 166). Of particular note are the comics and films that feature 'Acadieman', a character touted as "the first Acadian superhero… [who] has no special powers but… is heroic in the sense that he has the nerve to speak Chiac" (Comeau & King, 2016, pp. 184–185, citing Dano LeBlanc, creator of Acadieman).

Conclusion

Chiac's unique expressive force and increased public representation have strengthened its status and identity value. These factors, which support language maintenance, counter the numerous adverse pressures Chiac faces. The literature highlights the triumph of Chiac over historical stigmatisation, linguistic insecurity, institutional monoglossia, and fears of assimilation into English. While possibly influenced by interpretative bias due to their positive regard for the language, scholars broadly agree that Chiac now enjoys high vitality and is used "proudly and creatively" (Gadet & Hambye, 2018, p. 728). Vive le Chiac!

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