

English-French Macaronic Songs in Canada — A Research Note And Query

I. Sheldon Posen

Volume 14, Number 2, 1992

Folksongs
Chanson

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1082476ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082476ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

Association Canadienne d'Ethnologie et de Folklore

ISSN

1481-5974 (print)

1708-0401 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this article

Posen, I. (1992). English-French Macaronic Songs in Canada — A Research Note
And Query. *Ethnologies*, 14(2), 35–43. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1082476ar>

Article abstract

A *macaronic* song or narrative is one that intersperses two or more languages, with that of the narrative voice predominating. At least five English- French or French-English macaronic songs have circulated traditionally in Canada. Francophone and anglophone scholars rationalize their origin in bilingual dysfunction: they see in them a legacy of francophone Quebec and Acadian immigrants to New England who returned to Canada with songs half-remembered in two languages. My own opinion is that these songs comprise a *bona fide* song genre that originated as and is meant to be macaronic. I speculate that they might come out of a popular music tradition aimed at a relatively small, rather urbane, bilingual audience in Montreal or Quebec City.

ENGLISH-FRENCH MACARONIC SONGS IN CANADA — A RESEARCH NOTE AND QUERY

I. Sheldon POSEN
Ottawa, Ontario

The term *macaronic* was first used in 16th century Europe to denote Latin or Greek verse that had been peppered, for humour's sake, with Latin- or Greek-looking words that were really from the local vernacular.¹ In his celebrated dictionary, Samuel Johnson generalized the term away from the classical frame of reference, weighting his definition with moral ballast: "Macaronick poetry", he wrote, was verse "in which language is purposely corrupted".² Boswell reports that Johnson on one occasion was less judgmental, simply calling macaronics verse which contained "a mixture" of languages.³ This is more or less the common meaning of *macaronic* today: a song that intersperses two or more languages, with that of the narrative voice predominating. The term is also used of narrative. Where *macaronic* ends and *pidgin*, *patois*, and *creole* begin is a subject for a different note than this.

Some interesting questions are prompted by English-French macaronic songs in the repertoires of traditional and popular singers, past and present, in Canada. I recorded two such songs in a bilingual community on the Quebec side of the upper Ottawa River — specifically, on Allumette Island and in the countryside on the mainland adjacent to the Irish-Quebecois village of Chapeau, including the settlements of Chichester, Nicabeau, Sheenborough, and Demers Centre. I will save discussing the function of these macaronic songs within the performance community itself for another occasion. I am writing now with particular regard to the problematical aspects of the songs' origins.

Though Franz Boas wrote about Chinook-English macaronic songs in the very first volume of the *Journal of American Folklore*⁴ (he called the songs' language "jargon", not macaronic), in general folklorists working with English song have not been much concerned with the genre. (Other than Boas, there is only one discussion of macaronic song in all of *JAF*.⁵) It may be that macaronics aren't common enough in the traditional song of the

-
1. *Oxford English Dictionary*.
 2. E.L. McAdam, Jr., and George Milne, *Johnson's Dictionary: A Modern Selection*, New York, The Modern Library, 1965, p. 242.
 3. *Oxford English Dictionary*.
 4. Franz Boas, "Chinook Songs", *Journal of American Folklore* 1 (1888), p. 220-226.
 5. John O. West, "Cultural Confusion in the Playground", *Journal of American Folklore* 84 (1971), p. 344-346.

British Isles or the anglophone western hemisphere to have merited more attention. Ironically, they have been an important element in popular music in the United States since before the turn of the century. Tin Pan Alley and other pop songwriters seem to have taken delight in inserting into their English lyrics words native to many of the European immigrant and ethnic groups in America. One finds everything from Latin American Spanish (“Vaya Con Dios, My Darling”, “Mañana”, “South of the Border”, and many more) to Irish Gaelic (a host of popular Irish songs containing words like “macree”, “mavourney”, and “acushla”); from Cajun French (Hank Williams’s “Jambalaya”) to East European Yiddish (“Bei Mir Bist Du Shayn”⁶).

In popular song macaronics, the words from the “second” language were often used as a shortland to invoke a mood, to lend an element of “authenticity”, to provide some humour. Macaronics were cousins to the blackface minstrel and popular immigrant “dialect” songs of American vaudeville, whose language was English but which depended on “other group” accent and inflection and “immigrantized” English for effect, usually comic. Like them, most macaronic songs were aimed at the general public rather than at members of the groups whose languages they used. Macaronics might be seen as having acted as a sort of bridge between local and “mainstream” popular cultures, or even as a way for a second generation of immigrants to deal with — or distance themselves from — the first. However, I would argue that in terms of their major function, macaronic songs were part of American popular culture’s penchant for trivializing or sentimentalizing foreign cultures so they could be accommodated within the American world view.

It’s hard to say just what the original context would have been for either of the songs I recorded in the Chapeau area. One was sung by Cecil Kennedy, a lead burner at the atomic energy plant at Chalk River (about 40 kilometers up the Ottawa Valley from Pembroke, Ontario). Now in his seventies, Mr. Kennedy was born at the foot of Allumette Island near the francophone village of Demers Centre and grew up bilingual. He learned the song while working as a young man at a lumbercamp near Sturgeon Falls in north central Ontario. He says that he and his brothers were the first to perform it in the Chapeau area. I never heard him refer to the song by title; he sang it to me once, and I requested it thereafter as “Bord des Etats”. Its tune is “Sweet Betsy from Pike”. The following transcription⁷ is the way I, with my limited French, first wrote it down from Mr. Kennedy’s singing:

6. Perhaps the most reflexive macaronic pop song of all, being one continuous definition of itself. Sample lines:

Bei mir bist du shayn, please let me explain,
Bei mir bist du shayn means that you’re grand.

7. Posen tape transcript 102a 2-3.

Oh I left yesterday pour le bord des Etats
 With my portmanteau and my umb-er-ella
 I got on the gros char mais un peut zen retard [SIC]
 What do I says I ... [INAUDIBLE]

C'est par le window j'ai voulu s'embrasser [SIC]
 Mon cavalier but the train went away
 The train went so quick que j'arrive un peut loin
 J'embrasse une grosse vache qui 'gardait pour ce train.

Someone laisse un cri, "Now this place is Boston!"
 Pick up your satchel, hurry up you don't (?)
 With my portmanteau right under my bras
 I hit the poor man on the etcetera.

C'est au bord des Etats qu'ai avoir du fun
 Et avait un vache, oh son of a gun
 Mais me quand vient au Chapeau des pauvres Canadiens
 ... [INAUDIBLE]

According to Acadian folklorist Donald Deschênes, this song is generally known in French Canada as "Le Voyage à Boston" and sometimes "Corinne aux Etats". He has sent me copies of the two published versions he knows of, one from a Quebec CBC song collection⁸ and the other from an article by Deschênes himself containing a version "interprétée par la folkloriste acadienne Charlotte Cormier".⁹ About the song's popularity he writes, "même si cette chanson a été peu recueillie, elle semble passablement connue tant au Québec qu'en Acadie, et peut-être même chez les francophones en Nouvelle-Angleterre".¹⁰

The only other version of "Le Voyage à Boston" I have been able to locate was published by Edith Fowke in an article containing the texts and some discussion of two English-French macaronic songs collected by Marc Lalama, a student of hers.¹¹ The song is entitled "I Go Yesterday All

8. Soc. Radio-Canada, *Le temps de vivre, recueil de chansons, musique en feuilles, n° 1*, Montreal, SuperMagazine et Soc. Radio-Canada, 1979, p. 22.

9. Donald Deschênes, "Le rêve d'une vie meilleure dans les chansons acadiennes de départ pour les Etats-Unis" in Claire Quintal (sous la dir. de), *Vie français, Le patrimoine folklorique des Franco-Américains*, Québec, Le Conseil de la vie française en Amérique, 1986, p. 98-99.

10. Deschênes, personal communication, 1991.

11. Edith Fowke, "Two Canadian Macaronic Songs", *Canadian Folk Music Bulletin* 18:4 (December, 1984), p. 21-23.

Aboard Les Etats". It is substantially the same as the one sung by Mr. Kennedy and is more completely transcribed. I'll return later to Fowke's article and Mr. Lalama's other macaronic song.

The second macaronic song I recorded in the Chapeau area was sung by Cecil Kennedy, his brother Ken Kennedy, and by Lennox Gavan, about whom I have written elsewhere in some detail.¹² The song is known as "Landon's Dog" or "Old Nero". Here is Mr. Gavan's version:

Have you heard of the tavern at the foot of the hill
Down by the chute close to John Landon's mill
Where a gang of young fellows together would meet
For a good drop of whiskey and something to eat
And you're welcome all of you, heartily well
Gramacree welcome everyone.

It was early last spring in the year sixty-two
There assembled together a comical crew
They all did agree and they swore oaths so strong
That they'd have a fricot and that before long
And you're welcome...

Up steps old Jimmy, a jokish old man
Says he, "My young fellows, I'll tell you a plan:
I'll run down to John Landon's and steal the fat lamb
And bring it up here to the bonne femme
And you're welcome..."

You could see there was fun in grey Jimmy's eye
When for a short time he bid them goodbye
And it's up to John Landon's he quickly did run
And told them all there they were in for some fun
And you're welcome...

Says he, Poor old Nero is now growing old
Some night through the winter he'll die with the cold
We'll kill him and bring him up to the bonne femme
And she will not know but it is a fat lamb
And you're welcome...
So it's up to the kennel brave Jimmy did creep

12. I. Sheldon Posen, *For Singing and Dancing and All Sorts of Fun*, Toronto, Deneau Publishers, 1988.

And seized on old Nero and him fast asleep
 He threw the old dog across a pine log
 And with the grosse hache, là, he murdered the dog
 And you're welcome...

He cut off the four paws, the head and the tail
 And placed the four quarters snug into a pail
 With the pail on his arm he quickly did jog
 And to Mrs. Darby he handed the dog
 And you're welcome...

Mrs. Darby being pleased to see all the meat
 She ran for the bottle, good Jimmy to treat
 It was dressed up so nice and so neat and so clean
 But they all did agree that for lamb it looked lean
 And you're welcome...

Away to the kitchen she quickly did go
 To make preparation for the fricot
 And Jimmy did wonder why Landon stayed long
 For the steam in the kitchen began to smell strong
 And you're welcome...

Old Jimmy Bisson the greedy old beast
 He thought he would try how the mutton did taste
 He went up to the stove where the fricot was hot
 But he seized on a rib that stuck out of the pot
 And you're welcome...

The fricot was ready without much delay
 And Jim in a hurry he was called away
 He cursed and he swore at his very hard fate
 But he kindly told them on him not to wait
 And you're welcome...

They all ate away and were very well stuffed
 But oh, how old Bisson he grunted and puffed
 Mrs. Darby she asked them, "How did it go?"
 "Oh, mon Dieu", said Bisson, "ça c'est b'en beau!"
 And you're welcome...¹³

13. Josephine V. Macfadden, "Report on the Anglo-Celtic People of the Ottawa Valley", unpublished manuscript, Ottawa, National Museum of Man (Canadian Museum of Civilization), 1977.

Mr. Gavan's version of "Landon's Dog" is a double macaronic, if there is such a term, incorporating not only the French words but "gramacree", an anglicized pronunciation of the Irish Gaelic phrase, *a ghradh mo chroidhe*, "O love of my heart".¹⁴ Mr. Kennedy, on the other hand, sang this particular word more or less as a nonsense word, "gramakee", but on one occasion, untaped, I thought I heard him pronounce it "gramertzi" — to my ears, virtually *grand merci*. The jury is still out on this word.

"Landon's Dog" is said to have been in the repertoires of local singers of one and two generations ago, and is well known by reputation in the Chapeau area and beyond. I have one report of its having been taken down from the lips of a 103-year-old woman in Shawville, an anglophone Quebec town about 70 kilometers downriver from Chapeau. Residents of the Chapeau area believe "Landon's Dog" to have been locally composed: they cite the existence of a mill in the area at Chichester and of a Landon family who owned it. Local historian and song collector Rusty Leach says the incident took place at another Landon family's mill at Waltham at the mouth of the Black River, some 10 kilometers south of Chapeau, where Mrs. Darby was employed as cook. I haven't yet been able to confirm these facts. I also haven't found the song published anywhere except in Rusty Leach's own song collection.¹⁵

I've had no luck tracing the origins of these songs back farther than local ascription ("Landon's Dog") or first learning situation ("Bord des Etats"). My instinctive feeling is that neither has roots in local tradition: "Bord des Etats" is too well known outside the area and "Landon's Dog" is just too different in feel from any other song composed around Chapeau. Without burning any of my bridges back to tradition, I would say that popular song is the likely provenance — possibly recordings: even "Landon's Dog", which might be too long to fit on one side of a 78 r.p.m. record, could fit on two. But there is nagging doubt: none of the major media listings for popular song — for instance, the catalogues of 78 r.p.m. disks at the National Library of Canada or the Library of Congress — has so far yielded any of the titles for these songs. Neither song appears in the Moogk discography.¹⁶ Nor has either shown up in the sheet music catalogues of those institutions.

I know of three other Canadian macaronic songs in English and French. One is a song that appeared on records by Canadian folksong revival

14. Helen H. Flanders, Elizabeth F. Ballard, George Brown & Phillips Barry, *The New Green Mountain Songster: Traditional Folk Songs of Vermont*, Hatboro, Pennsylvania, Folklore Associates, 1939 (repr. 1966), p. 36.

15. Rusty Leach, *The Rusty Leach Collection of Upper Ottawa Valley Shanty Songs and Recollections*, Shawville, Quebec, Dickson Enterprises, 1984, p. 26-7.

16. Edward B. Moogk, *Roll Back the Years: History of Canadian Recorded Sound and Its Legacy: Genesis to 1930*, Ottawa, National Library of Canada, 1975.

singers, The Travellers,¹⁷ from Toronto, and Art Samuels¹⁸ from Montreal, called “On the Road to Old Grandmère”. It was written by Samuels. (I don’t know whether that disqualifies it from this discussion; surely it can be seen as continuing the tradition whose existence I am trying to trace.) Its text describes various characters the narrator meets along his way to visit his grandmother, including a woman who tells him, “Kind sir, you have cold blood/You must come from Toronto!” The chorus goes:

Un, deux, trois
 Encore une fois
 You meet the most interesting Québécois
 On the road to old Grandmère.

The other two are of older vintage and, I think, French songs with English interpolated within them. Actually, one, “I Went to the Market”, is more or less evenly split between English and French. It is well known in Quebec; in the rest of Canada, if someone knows a French-English macaronic song, it is usually this one. “I Went to the Market” may be the only song recorded by Gilles Vigneault containing English words.¹⁹ According to Carmel Bégin at the Canadian Centre for Folk Culture Studies²⁰ and Donald Deschênes,²¹ Vigneault added extra words to an already macaronic traditional Quebec song, which itself was metamorphosed from a song of France (Conrad Laforte turned up over 166 versions of it in Quebec; he gives it as “I-H-1, La Fille aux Oranges”²²). “I Went to the Market” reached anglophone listeners through such recordings as a Folkways album by folksingers Hélène Baillargeon and Alan Mills²³ and a 7-disk RCA Centennial set of Canadian folksongs.²⁴ Its chorus goes:

I love you, vous n’m’attendez guère
 I love you, vous n’m’attendez pas.

17. The Travellers, *Across Canada with the Travellers*, Hallmark Records CS-7, 1958.

18. Art Samuels, *Man of the Wide World*, Folkways Records FW 880, 1956.

19. Gilles Vigneault, *Gilles Vigneault à Bobino*, Le Nordet GVN 1008-1009, 1977 (?).

20. Personal communication, 1991.

21. Personal communication, 1991.

22. Conrad Laforte, *Le catalogue de la chanson folklorique français*, Québec, Presses Universitaires Laval, 1958.

23. Hélène Baillargeon and Alan Mills, *Songs of French-Canada / Chansons du folklore canadien-français*, Folkways Records FW 6918, 1955.

24. Alan Mills, *Canadian Folksongs / Chansons folkloriques du Canada*, RCA Victor - CBC Radio-Canada International CS-100, 1967.

The other French-English macaronic is the second of the pair printed by Fowke.²⁵ Its text is quite short:

Dans un salon chic où je fis la conquête
 D'une Miss Coquette qui n' parlais pas français
 Moi qui connait la langue de Shockesspeare
 Tendrement j' lui soupirais en Anglais:
 "O milady, Cherry Brandy,
 Beautiful mon Baby, To Be or Not To Be.
 O pickpocket, water closet
 O kiss me quick". Very good job in the music.

The singer who sang both this and "I Go Yesterday All Aboard Les Etats" said he learned them around 1920 at community dances in Beauce, Quebec whose "French townspeople originally heard them when they went to work in the lumber camps in Maine in the winter". Fowke explains why the songs are macaronic:

Apparently the songs were originally completely English and were changed later by the French because they couldn't remember all the English words, with the results that the songs became a standard half-English, half-French.²⁶

An explanation alluding to the same migration of Quebecois to New England is offered by Raoul Roy in his notes to "I Went to the Market" on the RCA Canadian Centennial set. Like Fowke, Roy finds an explanation for the macaronic in bilingual dysfunction:

Au 19ième siècle, plusieurs habitants de la province de Québec immigrèrent aux Etats-Unis. Ils durent évidemment apprendre l'anglais, tout en conservant leur langue maternelle. Plus tard, plusieurs de ces immigrants s'en revinrent au pays, après s'être rendu compte à quel point il peut être difficile de s'adapter aux coutumes d'un pays étranger. Cette chanson a sans doute été composée aux Etats-Unis, par un de ces bardes, devenu bilingue pour les besoins de la cause.²⁷

My own opinion is that these and all the songs we're dealing with here comprise a form that is developed enough and occurs in enough examples to constitute a *bona fide* song genre that originated as and is meant to be

25. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

26. *Ibid.*, p. 21.

27. Mills, *op. cit.*

macaronic. Some of its characteristics are: it leans toward first person narrative; it allows a varying balance of English/French usage; its mockery of self and other is closer in effect to Shakespeare's use of French in *Henry V* than William Henry Drummond's use of Quebecois dialect English in his "Baptiste" poems.²⁸ The genre presupposes a bilingual audience (obviously) that knows both English Canadian and French Canadian cultures; also one that is aware of and has a sense of humour about the stereotypes each group has of the other. Must that audience originally have been an American one? Could it not — must it not, have been Canadian?

I haven't seen their evidence, but I think it's interesting that Quebecois and Acadian writers have found the explanation for the French-English macaronics in French Canada's immigrant experience in the United States, rather than in a milieu involving francophone interaction with anglophones within the province of Quebec or New Brunswick. I also think it's significant that they see the macaronic element as having been produced by dysfunctional bilingualism.

I find myself hypothesizing in the opposite direction, a Canada-based origin legend based on bilingual competence. Perhaps, parallel to the case of macaronics in the U.S., these comic, macaronic English-French and French-English songs come out of a popular music tradition in Canada, maybe from the stage — variety or vaudeville — around the turn of the century, or from recordings a while later. But unlike the American situation, the songs might have been aimed at a relatively small, rather urbane, bilingual audience in Montreal or Quebec City.

This hypothesis is at least as logical as the Quebecois-immigrants-in-America scenario, and if it didn't happen this way, why didn't it? If the hypothesis turns out to be correct, it will open speculation in still other directions. For example: if macaronic songs are of more-or-less popular Canadian origins, why can't they be found more easily in archival listings of Canadian recordings and sheet music? If they sprang from a sophisticated city environment, what route did they take to enter the repertoires of anglophone and francophone traditional singers in rural Quebec and Ontario and New England? Come to that, why isn't it possible that "Landon's Dog" was, in fact, written in Chapeau, Quebec, rather than Montreal or even Bangor, Maine?

This note comprises all the data I have on this subject at the moment, and my best guesses. Clearly, further research and data are necessary. I'd be delighted to hear from others with information or ideas. Please write to me at 295 First Avenue, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, K1S 2G7.

28. E.g., *Johnnie Courteau and Other Poems*, New York, Putnam, 1901, and *The Habitant and Other French-Canadian Poems*, New York, Putnam, 1912.