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Does Mooch the Cat speak French?

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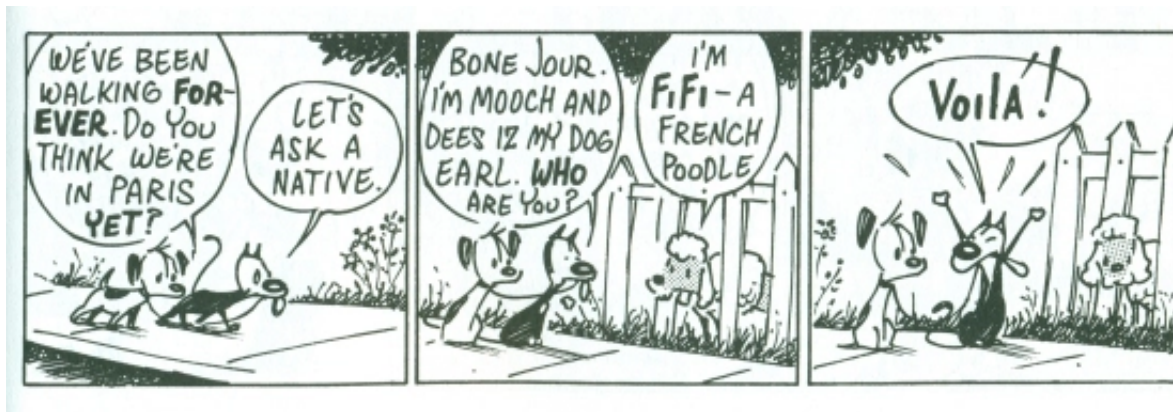
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Does Mooch the Cat speak French?

In the 1990s, I lived in Athens, Georgia, where I was a doctoral student in linguistics. I read the newspaper almost every day, and I started reading a comic strip called *Mutts*, by Patrick McDonnell. I loved the strip — the sweetness and good intentions of the dog, Earl, was paired with the slightly self-centered cat, Mooch, who also happened to be not quite as smart as Earl in many ways. These two characters are neighbors who live in an urban area that is best characterized as a city in the northeastern United States.

In the series that this strip comes from, Earl is on a leash waiting to be taken for a walk, but his human, Ozzie, gets distracted for a moment. In walks Mooch, who decides to pick up the leash and take Earl for his walk. Not knowing exactly where to go, Mooch decides to see Paris, and of course Earl tags along. After walking for an unspecified period of time, which Earl calls **FOR-EVER**, the pair decide to stop and ask whether they've made it to Paris.



(<https://pencilpanelpage.files.wordpress.com/2012/02/mooch-french0001.jpg>)

In his best “French,” Mooch makes the first conversational move. Getting an answer from Fifi, the French poodle, satisfies Mooch, of course, who celebrates their arrival in “Paris.”

In these three panels, McDonnell employs both French and English to convey the story, but he also uses other linguistic tools at his disposal. In panel 2, Mooch uses what linguists might call “Mock French,” a pretend French accent, in his attempt to speak with the local citizenry. The attempts at French include a simulated “bon jour” as well as French-accented English: “dees” for “this” and “iz” for “is.” In panel 2, then, the point is that Mooch is relying on language ideologies

based in Anglophone culture, having to do both with French as a linguistic system and with speaking French to native French speakers. Of course, Mooch is using English, not French, which means he's producing "English" as it would be produced (in a very stereotypical fashion) by a French speaker communicating in English.

As an aside, the food pun on "bon jour" is a hallmark of McDonnell's humor, which folds the pets' mindsets and attitudes into the strip whenever possible.

Panel 3 bears witness to Mooch's full-tilt code switch into French. It's as if Mooch exclaims *Eureka!*, planting his linguistic flag in "Paris," which he and Earl have managed to walk to. Of course, the accent mark (*accent aigu*) over the "a" of "Voilà!" is not the correct one. The "correct" spelling of this word would use the *accent grave* instead: "Voilà!" So even though the lexical item is indeed French, it is marked ever so subtly as produced by a nonnative speaker of French.

While this may not have been McDonnell's intention, Mooch's use of Mock French (Faux French?) demonstrates a stereotypical American attitude toward foreign languages: using a funny accent is a legitimate (or at least sufficient) mode of communication. Nevermind, of course, that Fifi, the French poodle, is speaking an "unaccented" English! Mooch proceeds as if he has successfully led Earl all the way to Paris. In later strips, Earl isn't convinced they've made it to Paris, which turns out to be the case. They make it back home eventually, and when Mooch expresses some concern about their outing, Earl assures him that they'll always have Paris.



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About Frank Bramlett

Until June 2014, I am a visiting lecturer in the English Department at Stockholm University, where I offer seminars in Sociolinguistics; Language and Gender; and Language and Comics; among others. For Fall 2014, I will return to the English Department at the University of Nebraska at Omaha.

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