

TEUF LOVE

Verlan in French Rap and Youth Identity

By Kelsey Westphal

It is a common childhood experience to use or invent a secret language or code, but not many people keep using it after age twelve or so. This is not the case in modern Paris. My summer SURF project was an investigation into the syllable-switching slang practice known as “verlan” as it is used and viewed in Paris today by people of all ages. In this paper, however, I will give a quick overview of one element of my overall project, which looked at verlan’s use by rappers and residents of the *banlieues* or suburban ghettos of Paris. I came to see three compelling uses of this code: as a means of self-representation, next as a means of discussing taboo concepts, and lastly as a means of introducing semantic and formal evolution into the French language. These different elements will reveal the ways that verlan empowers these marginal communities to protest their exclusion, foster an alternative community, and advocate for a France that accepts linguistic and, ultimately, social diversity.

Before I review my findings, let me give you a brief background on verlan. *Verlan* is, at its most basic, a form of metathesis, meaning the last syllable is placed at the beginning of the word. Take the sentence, “*c’est une fête*,” which means “it’s a party.” *Fête* (party) becomes “*teuf*” and is inserted into a sentence which is otherwise still in standard French, which would produce the phrase “*c’est une teuf*.” Naturally, this makes the meaning of the sentence unclear to people unfamiliar with the language, as the central information is encoded. Though there are traces of the use of *verlan* as far back as the 1100s, it was fully systematized through rap music, fanzines, and graffiti in the 1980s by young, second-generation immigrants, many of North African descent, living in the generally lower-income, difficult to reach suburbs.

Slang has a special power in a country that is, in the words of the secretary general of the center of Franco-Arab relations, “obsessed with its language.” The government language bureau, the *Académie Française*, is charged with fixing its “correct” usage by “defending” the language from foreign terms. Since *verlan* introduces unusual sound patterns into the language and is strongly associated with these lower-class, foreign youth, many see *verlan* as a linguistic symptom of the “social insecurity” emphasized by mainstream media coverage of riots and gang behavior in the suburbs.

I performed my research with the goal of seeing beyond this reductionist view of the slang practice and its speakers by encountering this in-language from within the culture. To collect my data, I traveled to Paris, conducted interviews with individuals ranging from rappers (both the well-known to the underground) and anarchists, middle-class Parisian youth, university professors, employees of the language bureau at the *Académie Française*, and upper-middle class Parisian adults. I also attended rap concerts, engaged in participant observation, and documented the presence of *verlan* in street art, print, television, and social media.

In addition to my on-site research, I sought out relevant research on language, power, and expression. For this I turned to the works of J. P. Colin, Trinh T. Minha, and Michael Adams. According to J.P. Colin, slang’s rejection of standard language represents “an intention and a pursuit of power, a fairly severe recreation of relations between dominated and dominating.”¹ In the same vein, Trinh T. Minha writes regarding power relations in culture and creation: “how can one re-create without re-circulating domination?” In undoing established models and codes, plurality adds up to no total...this non-totalness never fails either to baffle or to awaken profound intolerance and anxieties.”² Minha defines artistic or linguistic variation and experimentation as the act of “re-naming so as to un-name,”³ a rejection of the idea of fixity and singularity in identity and creation that any dominant culture tends to promote. Despite the subversive quality of slang, some researchers point out that it has important aesthetic and expressive qualities that

1 Minha, Trinh T. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, gender and cultural politics*. Routledge, 1991.

2 Ibid.

3 Ibid.

deserve a closer look. Michael Adams argues that, “slang converges on poetic language and realizes in everyday speech the common, human poetic urge.”⁴ Adams goes on to cite Walt Whitman, who says: “slang, or indirection, is an attempt of common humanity to escape from bald literalism and express itself illimitably.”⁵ It is with these linguistic and social theories that I approached my research site and subjects.

Since *verlan* is so strongly associated with one particular socio-economic group, employing the code becomes an instant identity marker. The particular words that undergo this metathetical transformation are all the more revealing. One of the most direct and obvious ways to represent oneself is with one’s name or stage name. During my frequent visits to the Radio Fréquence Paris Plurielle, an independent, non-profit radio station in Paris, I met DJ Nes Pounta. He introduced me to the artist Nasme, a Parisian-by-way-of-West-Indies rapper whose name (Nasme) is the word ‘menace’ in *verlan*. This is an example of the re-appropriation that defines much of *verlan*, the way it is used to recreate and reinterpret the negative representations of *banlieue* residents that many in the city center hold. By inverting the syllables of this insult or negative characterization of suburban residents, the rapper Nasme divests it of its pejorative sting and transfers this symbolic power instead to his creative and artistic abilities. He is un-naming himself as a menace and renaming himself with his own invention, Nasme, putting his artistic, alchemical language powers in precedence over whatever stereotypes people might tack onto him and other rappers.

Being a poet in France is not easily done, especially with such a vaunted literary history. According to Professor Jean Pierre Goudaillier, the French school system refuses the epistemology of suburban youth, making poetic and social enfranchisement especially difficult. Alongside the concrete barriers of the B line of the suburban metro, one can see the words SPOET in graffiti. This is an unconventional *verlanization* of the word ‘poets,’ where only the plural marker—“s”—is put first, symbolically foregrounding the multiple nature of these artists and poets and their collective expressive mission. In the end, SPOET presents a vision of graffiti that is community-oriented and esthetically motivated: this artist or artists

4 Adams, Michael. *Slang, the People’s Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 2009

5 Ibid.

want to bring poetry and color to the drab cement and electrical lines that surround the RER. Here we see manifested Adam's concept of the common human poetic urge: for SPOET, poetry can be done by anyone anywhere, not just in strictly literary, textual, or perfectly grammatical contexts.

This same poetic urge can be seen in a particularly rich word field of *verlan*: 'toponymy,' or the act of naming places. During my interviews with Zoxea, a former member of the 1990's collective *Sages Poètes de la Rue*, he told me about his youth in Boulogne, a commune to the west of Paris. Zoxea's particular 'spot' in the region was the Sèvres bridge, or *Pont de Sèvres*, which he and his friends would call the "*Pont de Vreuss*."⁶ This particular formation is a declension or reduction of *verlan*: simply reversing the syllables of Sèvres would produce the word *vreussé* ([vres] + [sè]). Eliminating the final vowel, the "é" sound, simplifies the word's pronunciation, facilitating rapid communication with peers and increasing the word's indecipherability to others. Professor Goudaillier explained the impulse behind such practices in an interview, saying "place is important when you have nothing, when you have less than others. The place where you are must be *your* place, and naming the place becomes possession of the place."⁷ If we use Minha's theory, these young poets are re-naming so as to also un-name. Zoxea and his friends contest official control over language and space by taking the syllables out of the "correct" order of standard French, thereby establishing a new order that incorporates their spatial and social presence.

When one's social and spatial presence is not acknowledged, it can take on the symbolic gravity of a taboo. Much of French mainstream media and discourse regarding immigrants is assimilationist to the point of demonstrating what Meredith Doran describes as a kind of symbolic "ethnic cleansing."⁸ This reluctance to acknowledge the ethnic and racial diversity of modern France can explain the respective abundance and frequency of racial and ethnic terms in *verlan*. In the words of Zoxea, "[with] certain words that could be hard to accept in society, putting them backwards softens them."⁹ This is Whitman's idea of indirection at its finest; not saying the baldly literal can be liberating, and allow for more open, and strangely more direct, communication.

6 Zoxea. Personal Interview. 2 July 2012.

7 Goudaillier, Jean Pierre. Personal Interview. 28 June 2012.

8 Meredith Doran (2007): *Alternative French, Alternative Identities: Situating Language in la Banlieue*, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 11:4, 497-508.

9 Ibid.

Words like *renoi* for *noir* ([r] + [e] + [noi]) or black, *cainf* for *africain* ([cain] + [afri] simplified into [cainf]) or African, *beur* and *reubeu* for *arabe* or arab ([be] + [ara] simplified into [beur]), are used to directly address people of these origins. Saying “Hey *renoi*” establishes camaraderie and communication, but saying “Hey *noir*” would be completely offensive, even racist. Suburban poet and ex-rapper Igor Pommier explained it thus: to use *verlan* is to describe things the way suburban youth would, and therefore from their point of view and with their value systems. In this case, the values transmitted through *verlanized* racial terms acknowledge and accept the racial diversity that define the *banlieues*. Bringing up people’s origins is not done to humiliate or denigrate but to speak honestly about a social reality that is often treated as a threat to France’s identity.

Expressing vulnerable emotions is often taboo, especially during adolescence, which makes *verlan* a sort of linguistic relief valve. While hanging out at a freestyle session with Bhati, a member of the rap trio BPM, I overheard him describe the premise of one of his songs as “we are all a bit *duper*,” which is *verlan* for *perdu* or “lost.” In this instance, *verlan* allows for genuine emotional expression in a limited social context; Bhati can say how he feels to people who understand *verlan* and know about his struggle to find himself as a young, striving rapper, but at the same time avoid broadcasting his feelings to the whole world. Nevertheless, the novelty of the word still shows that despite the singer’s feeling of uncertainty, he still can act and wield the instruments of his art—words—to say what he wants, as indirectly as necessary to avoid social awkwardness and portray an artistic, subjective, youthful experience that just the word ‘*perdu*’ would not be culturally capable of capturing.

Another example of the representation of taboo experience can be seen with the word “*lèrega*” for the word *galère*, which means problem or difficulty. *Lèrega* is used by suburban youth to describe the hassles and disappointments of daily life and their attempts to enter society. For example, on the online dictionary of the “zone” as the suburbs are sometimes called, one can see a sample sentence: “Since I was fired from my job as a supervisor, I’ve had nothing but *lèregas*.”¹⁰ Unlike the hassles of those who are already part of society, *lèrega* establishes the outsidership of this trial, the twofold and conflicting nature of trying to prove oneself in French society and amongst ones peers in the suburbs. Jean Pierre Goudaillier

10 “Lèrega”. *Le Dictionnaire de la Zone*. Cobra le Cynique, n.d. Web. 28 Nov. 2012. My translation.

summed it up as saying “I am experiencing social precarity,”¹¹ which he opposed to the sterile euphemisms like “social insecurity” used by the mainstream media. By using *verlan*, one can voice his or her discontent and desire for change in their particular socio-economic context, both keeping with the original meaning of the word and simultaneously dismantling its official structure and meaning.

This dismantling of form and meaning is my third point, and one of the most fascinating things I discovered during my interviews. First, *verlan* can amplify the meaning of words, as seen in the word “*vénère*,” from “*énervé*,” for irritated or annoyed. Akye, a singer in the anarchist rap group *Première Ligne*, found the word in *verlan* to have a far more severe connotation, as if he were saying “I am *very* annoyed.” He attributed this effect to the sonic, poetic qualities of the word: starting with ‘V’ was more direct, more piercing, more *énervé*.

Words can also be completely reversed in meaning. For example, the word *chanmé*, from *méchant*, which is the word for “mean” ([chant] + [mé]). The underground rapper Yannick explained how the sonic qualities of the word influenced its connotation for him. The transformation is formal as well, as the negating prefix ‘mé’ is put at the end and divested of its negating power, which then allows the smoother ‘ch’ sound to introduce the word. These changes distance the word enough in sound from the original to allow in turn for this total reversal in connotation. With these and many other words, the semantic change depends more on an individual’s esthetic experience than dictionary definitions—people will use *verlan* as they please, with the context and intonation affecting its use as much as anything. As such, these semantic changes created with *verlan* challenge the ideas of fixed meaning or reference, demonstrating both Minha’s concept of non-totalness and Whitman’s idea of the illimitability of expression that comes with slang.

Another challenge to fixity is the constant formal evolution of the actual *verlan* process. To Akye, “There are no rules, really. Everyone does what they want with words. Sometimes it just sounds good, the sonority of the word works, so people like to say the word this way.”¹² Nes Pounta cited the example of the *verlan* word for ‘to eat’ (“*manger*”), which has gone from *géman* to *gem* to *gemgem* in just a few years. *Verlan* today has expanded beyond simple metathesis. This constant and unregulated language change

11 Goudaillier, Jean Pierre. Personal Interview. 28 June 2012.

12 Akye. Personal Interview. 24 July 2012.

creates a non-totality, which is certainly part of what makes the dominant powers uneasy: *verlan* is impossible to conceive of in its entirety and is therefore impossible to control or capture, and by extension so too are those who speak it.

This absence of rules extends to what words are *verlanized* as well, creating what DJ Nes Pounta called a “*bonne bouillabaisse*”¹³ of slang. *Verlan* is bursting at the seams with foreign vocabulary and sound patterning: Arabic and English, gypsy slang, even the Senegalese language Wolof are transformed into *verlan* or used alongside *verlan* terms. Jean Pierre Goudaillier mentioned a particularly interesting hybridized *verlan* word, *darreuf*, that illustrates this process. The Arabic prefix “da,” which designates the oldest brother responsible for taking care of his siblings, is melded with *reuf*, *verlan* for *frère* or brother. This creates a term that fits the modern situation of a North African immigrant family: surrounded by a culture without a term for this kind of older brother, the term is put with *verlan* to give it sense, and amplified in its redundancy. Reminding the French of their troubled colonial past, especially by remodeling the French language to do so, can explain its troubled reception. Goudaillier explained it thus: “there is a distinctively North African pronunciation, it’s sure and certain, it’s obvious...The French don’t like it...it is the Algerian war for them, this accent.”¹⁴ To acknowledge France’s part in the misery of North Africa is to acknowledge their part in bringing *verlan* about. A very tricky feedback loop indeed!

One can sum this all up with the words of Igor Pommier, poet, scholar and rapper: “it is a contestation of admitted language, and the expression of a rupture.”¹⁵ As long as this rupture persists, *verlan* will too: it is a way to speak out, but also to speak down, speak sideways, speak backwards, to speak as one wants to instead of the way one is told to. It is an expression of the common, human poetic urge that takes for its ideal the personal esthetic experience of a word instead of perfect grammar or pre-defined literary language. The revitalizing, playful force it brings to the language will ultimately help to keep it alive and dynamic, something beneficial rather than destructive. It is hard to say what the future of such a mercurial code might be, but whatever it may become, one hopes that these youths will continue to make themselves heard. Theirs are the voices of young and new France, and we should be listening.

13 Pounta, Nes. Personal Interview. 14 June 2012.

14 Goudaillier, Jean Pierre. Personal Interview. 28 June 2012.

15 Pommier, Igor. Personal Interview. 22 June 2012.

Bibliography

Adams, Michael. *Slang, the People's Poetry*. Oxford University Press, 2009.

Akye. Personal Interview. 24 July 2012.

Colin, J.P. *Argot et poésie: Essais sur la deviance lexicale*. Presses Universitaires de Franche-Comté, 1970.

Goudaillier, Jean Pierre. Personal Interview. 28 June 2012.

“Lèrega”. *Le Dictionnaire de la Zone*. Cobra le Cynique, n.d. Web. 28 Nov. 2012. My translation.

Meredith Doran (2007): *Alternative French, Alternative Identities: Situating Language in la Banlieue*, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, 11:4, 497-508.

Minha, Trinh T. *When the Moon Waxes Red: Representation, gender and cultural politics*. Routledge, 1991.

Pommier, Igor. Personal Interview. 22 June 2012.

Pounta, Nes. Personal Interview. 14 June 2012.

Zoxea. Personal Interview. 2 July 2012.