Bad French: Imagining illiteracy on the margins of Paris

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Bad French: imagining illiteracy and managing difference in Paris’ Banlieues.

Introduction:

Thanks, I’m very excited (and a bit nervous) to share some of the very preliminary ideas from my coffee and netflix in Paris. I’m not going to be talking about Bad French as in making mistakes, something I did a lot of during my CHESS fieldwork, but images of illiteracy and linguistic difference in popular media.

I explore the constructions of a mock urban French that sounds hip at first but echoes colonial advertisements that positions subjects as not fully literate. Oasis juice’s anthropomorphized Verlan-speaking fruit, "Onsfan la Poire", recalls the mock pidgin of the older ad slogan "y a bon ...Banania". In the language of these ads images ranging from savage illiteracy to dopey gang members” are ascribed to what Inoue termed the “ventriloquized bodies” (2003) of students of color in France’s urban peripheries.

Linguistic difference is constructed and then represented as something that needs to be managed. After Advertisements portray urban youth language as deficient, official discourses, like the 2009 speech by former minister for family and solidarity Nadine Morano, portray the “jeune musulman” the young muslim who has no job, wears his hat backwards and speaks in Verlan, reducing social and academic isolation to underachievement and a lack of mastery of standard French.

Taking as a starting point the ads I saw in cafes and food trucks, I will examine three representations of cultural and linguistic difference: Savage illiteracy, comical delinquency, and typos as terrorist menace.
The image above depicts a cartoonish tirailleur senegalais, the front line soldiers in the French colonial army, drinking banana hot chocolate. The fake pidgin tagline below him reads “y a bon”. Began in the colonial period but used until 2006, this creepy colonialist language can still be seen. In a 2011 article anti racist group MRAP stated that lines like this are teaching young French people “des le biberon,” from their first baby bottle that black people are caricatures, incapable of speaking anything other than a simplified French.

Although this ad clearly doesn’t reflect black voices, it does reflect historical practices of language teaching. In his recent book “Race and War in France: Colonial Subjects in the French Army” Historian Richard Fogarty describes how Senegalese soldiers were taught a simplified pidgin French that corresponded to, and enforced, colonial imaginings of their intellectual inferiority. This language permitted their inclusion in the army, but enforced their social exclusion. Fogarty notes this was part of an explicit policing of color lines, as colonial subjects began to move in the metropole, fake pidgin prevented them from being taken seriously as speaking subjects.
New descriptions of urban language these reflect old colonial cultural stereotypes, what Flores and Rosa (2015) describe as raciolinguistic ideologies. Despite being written 496,000 times, at last google count, urban French is described as an oral language, “without grammar”, and urban speakers are often depicted as less than fully literate – as this cartoon, where a suited man rebukes a hoodie wearing youth that even when speaking you make spelling errors – suggests.

Racaille
Images of comical delinquents transform linguistic creativity into a language of academic failure

Verlan is the language associated with minorities in the banlieues, housing projects on France’s urban peripheries, named by August Le Breton to describe 1940’s prison slang, is a game of syllable inversion with roots going back to the 15th century “argot à clefs”. While in the middle
ages rabat (coat) became tabar, in the 90’s Metro became tromé, and a bit later I become a meuf.

Easily identifiable, Verlan comes to stand for “banlieue language” a series of urban speech practices that range from the use of inversion, slang, interlangaging and codeswitching, palatalization and rhythm shifts. So not just tromé but “Je kiff pas ces mecs zarbi dans le tromé. If verlan was once as bourdieou’s marches francs, a language of roaming gangs free from linguistic and social norms, today it is also a way in which middle class kids try to sound cool.

We can see this in the mock verlan of Oasis’ fake juice.
Verlan and urban slang are commonly referenced by hipsters and in media, yet this doesn’t mean previous connotations are erased. As Jane Hill notes with mock Spanish, mock urban language serves to give the user a casual cosmopolitan air, (maybe in France Bohemian Bourgeois Chic), yet it still indirectly communicates negative stereotypes of the community depicted. She also notes the indirect meaning is confirmed by the intertextual consistency of these references, as when fake patois juice ads follow colonial hot chocolate ones - not to mention the oversexualized zebras of the Orangina campaign.

Following Hill’s (2005) work on Mock language in internet searches, I conducted some preliminary searches on Verlan. I examined the top 25 google.fr/com results, noting the most frequent descriptors and the most frequently occurring verlan vocabulary. Together a consistent series of images emerged: delinquency (verbal art described as cunning), further expressed in a lack of school motivation (laziness, “authentic” verlan words themselves described as hanging about the corridors and not going to class) and a desire to party, with accompanying vulgarity about women. These accorded with observations from my fieldwork, such as joking newspaper headlines about “kiffing the keufs” or liking the cops, or when a middle class professor I meet said he use verlan only to ask if you “pecho”, or picked up a woman.

Most striking was the link between this youth language and images of academic failure, as we can see in this cartoon, which mocks a young boy, shown living in housing projects, and his
academic abilities saying that he would be able to skip a grade if the textbooks were in Verlan:

This is only funny (ok, its actually not funny) if you presume that he is already seriously behind in school.

This image of academic failure continues. French Wikipedia presented 11 words for getting high, and not one for school. Within the top three results for each of the most common words was something mocking academics, most often the sentence that defined the word, as in ““this exam is so boring” c’est trop relou, cet exam”. Even when included as part of “advanced” French lessons for American students, Verlan speakers were portrayed as not very smart and as failed bilinguals (as in for example Kerridine Soltani’s song about verlan). This conforms to Hill’s discussion of how mock language conforms to white speakers positional superiority, while indirectly denigrating the other.

Translation also functions to expand the register of mock Verlan, confirming the Indirect indexicality of the language as one of academic failure and comical delinquency. Inoue’s Speech Without a Speaking Subject (2003) discusses the role of translation and dubbing in linguistically constructing raced, gendered, and classed identities. The social images of language are constructed in reference to global ideals – in this case often images from American media. In films like How High African American characters are dubbed in a French heavy in Verlan and slang words, especially when they are shown as hilariously academically inept and disinterested. Watching the dubbed of How high taught me 19 new words for joints and getting high. Verlan was used to show difference and highlight borders, as when African American stoners talk to white Harvard intellectuals. Further work might continue to explore Inoue’s concepts of translation to examine how images of African American language and identities help shape representations of banlieue French, as well as at American language classes’ representations of Verlan and urban language more generally.

Mock language has political consequences. Back to, Nadine Morano, the former minister of Solidarity who in one breath equated Islam and Verlan, and sagging pants and social failure.
backwards language, back wards culture, backwards hats. Using verlan as a shorthand, she shamed creativity to blame kids for their own social exclusion. Easier than paying for enough teachers in St. Denis.

Terrorist

If verlan is less used by minority students, Arabic and other language mixing increases. This seen by commentator and urban dictionary editor Cobra Le Cynique as a people staying with their families, termed a “repli communautaire”. In France this was always viewed negatively (if the people are not white) but now communitarianism begins to be seen as fundamentalism.

Alain Finkelkraut, a member of the academie Francaise and Gilles Kepel, a “media intellectual” and author “terror in the hexagon”, describe urban French as “the language of the enemy” in a recent radio show. Small grammatical infelicities, primarily apparent in the written text, of the 11/13 attacker’s manifesto were, for Kepel, a sign that ALL young Muslims see Arabic as the only true language for thinking the world. What might have been seen as typos in another, more Catholic, context, were signs of young Muslims desire to Arabicize and barbarize French.

Meanwhile on twitter #je suis circonflexe erupted in (often themselves ungrammatical) denunciations of the new spelling rules. They were as a plot by the Moroccan-born education minister Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, a sign of linguistic and social decline, the beginning of “the great replacement” of French culture by Islam. As one twitter user put it, under a picture of the Arabic alphabet, “there is no circumflex in our replacement alphabet”.

Effectivement, il n'y a pas d' #accentcirconflexe dans l'alphabet de remplacement

Happy Endings

Despite hipsters or pundits like Finkelkraut, young people are clearly still using language for creative and transgressive purposes. I will end by briefly mentioning three sites that go beyond parties, “teuf” and “ouf”.

First, banlieue residents contribute to an online forum called “dictionnaire de la zone” (zone refers both to the banlieues, and to the french term “citoyens de seconde zone” or second class
citizens) where urban multilingual slang and its etymology are recorded and debated. Recently proposed words include those that use vularity to mock fundamentalism, such as waha (grosse) bite, for Wahhabi and multilingual puns such as the reverlanization (reversal) of the word for flic, of cop, from “keuf”, to “feuk” to sound like an English word you might associate with the cops. Do bilingual French English puns have something to add to Inoue’s ideas of identities in translation?

Recent protests against police violence and work law reforms find inspiration in urban language graffiti. These include banners with lines from French Rap, and protest slogan tags. One particularly remarkable piece of wordplay I saw during my fieldwork with student strikers, was a tag that reused the nike swoosh. Nike said with a French accent, recalls the rap group Nique ta Mere to say nique ta banque. Screw your banks.

Finally, Twitter hashtags from #jesuistoujourspascharlie to #laicite offer a space to discuss marginalized issues, or to mock and subvert dominant voices. A French high school student started my #silesnoirsparlaientcommedesblancs, or “if black people talked like white people.” Which inspired others such as “if women talked like men”, which was particularly popular on a tunisin feminist blog. These offer funny reversals of the language of everyday racism, sexism, and islamophobia including one my favorites, something like “cath e rinnne? I’ll call you kadiatiou it’s simpler”.
Despite increased linguistic policing and increasingly violent physical policing, young people subvert and challenge dominant discourses that equate migrants minorities and terrorists, with creativity and intelligence they assert they are neither savage illiterates, comic delinquents, nor linguistic terrorists.

Thanks very much.

Abstract

Following Hill’s (2005) analysis of mock Spanish through internet searches, this paper explores the indexicality of nonstandard, “bad French” in popular media. It explores the constructions of a false urban French that echoes of colonial advertisements and positions subjects as not fully literate. Oasis juice’s anthropomorphized Verlan-speaking fruit, “Onsfan la Poire”, recalls the raciolinguistic ideologies (Rosa & Flores 2015) of the older tagline “y a bon …Banania”. Images ranging from savage illiteracy to roaming gangs of “racaille” are ascribed to the “ventiloquized bodies” (Inoue 2003) of students of color in France’s urban peripheries. If advertising both mocks and re appropriates student linguistic creativity, its false urban voice it resurfaces in official discourses about young people of color, such as the 2009 speech by former minister for family and solidarity Nadine Morano about the “jeune musulman” who has no job, wears his hat backwards and speaks in Verlan, that reduce social and academic isolation to underachievement and a lack of mastery of standard French. More recent discourses, from #jesuiscirconflex to France Culture’s program Repliques describe this urban voice as linguistic terrorism, responsible not only for failing school but for the barbarization of France and of French.


