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Le verlan : a rooted sociolect symbolizing hybrid identities

“Le verlan c’est chébran”¹ could be a sentence pronounced by a youngster living in the Parisian outskirts. Verlan is a linguistic process, whose name derives from “l’envers”, which means backwards (Doran in Pavlenko:2004). This secret code is used by the population of “la banlieue” (suburb), particularly in the periphery of the French capital. It was popularized in the ‘80s and quickly took on a larger meaning as a representation of a multicultural and multilingual, marginalized community. The rise of verlan indicates a widespread struggle. First, it derives from the specific space and populations of “la banlieue”, characterized by their negative representations in French media. Second, it serves as a linguistic device used to obscure messages within works of art or to evade the authorities within criminal organizations. Third, the set of linguistic practices and alterations show the symbolic value at stake for the speakers and recognize the creation of a ‘third space’. Finally, verlan is seen as a tool to create a sense of belonging in a society dominated by fixed representations, allowing immigrant descendants to finally construct positive hybrid identities. In the age-old ‘Us vs. Other’ dialogue, verlan is seen as one code among various linguistic processes, a simple reflection of its territory and the several facets of the French language and culture.

Verlan emerges from “la banlieue”, in multiethnic, low-income, post-colonialist settings (Doran:2007); but also in the marginalized space of “les cités”, a suburban area formed by homogenous groups of buildings, usually low-income housing projects (Doran in Pavlenko:2004). This linguistic device is thus primarily spoken by the youth community living in poor conditions in these disadvantaged neighborhoods. Tellingly, the speakers refer to themselves as “zonards”, from the word ‘zone’, linking themselves to these distinct areas. Verlan typically alters standard French terms, borrowing from various languages such as Arabic, English or Romani, and allowing for its distinctive prosodic and phonemic features (Doran in Pavlenko:2004). Speakers of verlan and the general community of “la banlieue” have been particularly marginalized in the media, as their habits defy the dominant norm. Over the past decades, a larger audience increased its awareness of the geographical space of “la banlieue” through its representations in French media, which showed a world of poverty on the outskirts of the capital. The Parisian suburbs were repeatedly depicted as violent, linked to societal tensions and integration problems (Doran:2007). Such negative portrayals rapidly settled “la banlieue” as a place of delinquency and illegalities and, therefore, created a strong ideology of adversity and fear. The multiplicity of languages and cultures was either absent from media reports or treated as a source of conflict (Doran:2007). This strong devaluation of diversity and

¹ “le verlan c’est branché” = verlan is cool

drastic description of a national threat was consistent with the ideology of the nation-state (Doran:2007). In fact, France practices a policy of cultural exclusionism. The name of the language equals that of the country as well as the nationality. This feature “allows languages to be seen as possessions, whose integrity and purity must be safeguarded” (Romaine:1995). In the 17th century, French academics decided that language was to represent the upper class. The media perpetuated the apparition of a standard French and negated any other forms of language (Sloutsky&Black:2008). This ideology secured the image of what it meant to be French: monolingual, monocultural and monoethnic (Doran in Pavlenko:2004). Indeed, the national expression “nos ancêtres les Gaulois” (our ancestors the Gauls) helps to keep a vivid representation of expectations. Thus, given its multicultural and multilingual nature, “la banlieue” was inconsistent with the linguistic policies and the imagined cultural depiction of France. Yet, verlan created a powerful in-between communication tool for self-identification (Azra&Cheneau:1994). By applying verlan to the word Arab, for example, speakers created “rebeu”. The word was inverted once more to become “beur” (Sloutsky&Black:2008). The word “beur is believed to have entered circulation by word of mouth among youths of immigrant origin in the Paris area who began applying the term to themselves during the 1970s” (Hargreaves:1990). The youngsters self-identified using verlan, and therefore, demonstrated a sense of belonging to their local community (Azra&Cheneau:1994). Like “beur”, verlan words are part of a larger linguistic and cultural history.

Whereas standard language is the public mirror of the country, used in dictionaries and learned at school, non-standard languages, like slang, colloquialisms and verlan, are spoken in closed spaces, leading to their mystification (Méla:1991). Verlan notably derives, in part, from “argot”, a language used in the Parisian criminal fraternity, which functioned as a code, indecipherable to the police (Hargreaves:1990). Furthermore, the urbanization of Paris and the high flux of migration intensified population mixing while spreading borrowings from different languages and registers (Sloutsky&Black:2008). As a result, most common verlan words belong to the popular French register (Azra&Cheneau:1994). Thus, verlan is more than the simple process of inverting syllables, as similar processes have been found since the Middle Ages. For example, in 1190, Beroul gives Tristan the name “Tantris”; in 1585, people renamed “Bourbon” as “Bonbour”; in the 18th century, “Sequinzouil” was used to refer to Louis XV (Sloutsky&Black:2008). *Lettre de la Hyene* provides another example as Toulon becomes “Lontou” (Azra&Cheneau:1994). Voltaire’s pseudonym is also thought to be a form of syllabic inversion: Airvault, the original town of the writer, verlanized as Vault-air, becomes Voltaire (Sloutsky&Black:2008). This process is, therefore, ancient and typically used in literature to

obscure meaning. In 1978, Renaud's *Laisse Béton*² definitively popularized verlan nationwide through music and many works of art followed suit: *Les Ripoux*³ by Claude Zidi in 1983 and Josiane Balasko's *Les keufs*⁴ in 1987 (Sloutsky&Black:2008). In 1992, the creation of Radio Beur contributed to the diffusion of Arabic and Berber songs, and the Beur rock band *Carte de séjour* successfully combined French and Arabic in their creations (Hargreaves:1990). The main feature of verlan is the sound it produces: the words sing and create a captivating rhythm (Bachmann&Basier:1984). Further analysis of the set of linguistic alterations demonstrates the mechanisms responsible for this effect.

As a linguistic device, verlan does not alter entire sentences. Words, typically monosyllabic or dissyllabic, are formed by reversing the syllables: "louche" (suspicious) becomes chelou; "fou" (crazy) becomes ouf. Verlan words are usually invariable and without conjugation (Azra&Cheneau:1994). One exception is found with the past participle of catch: "il m'a pécho", meaning he caught me (Méla:1991). Verlan also treats some two-worded phrases as disyllabic words: "vas-y" (come on) converts to ziva; "par terre" (on the floor) evolves into terpa (Méla:1991). Rarely, three-syllable words can be used in verlan: "défoncé" (high on drugs) is fonsdé; "énervé" (angry) becomes vénère (Azra&Cheneau:1994). In fact, phonetically, verlan respects the rules of spoken French. The final muted 'e' can be pronounced in spoken French; therefore, speakers generally use it as a syllable to create verlan (Méla:1991): "noir" (black) evolves into renoir; "bête" (stupid) converts to teubé (Sloutsky&Black:2008). Transformations also involve truncation, for instance "racaille" (scum) becomes kayra, while "discret" (discreet) amounts to scrède, as well as the alteration of vowels that do not respect the natural sonority progression: "moi" (me) is wam; "pied" (foot) is yep (Azra&Cheneau:1994). Moreover, "verlan differs in prosody, as the stress may be placed in non-standard ways making word boundaries difficult to decipher. Finally, verlan is characterized by a distinctive vocalic quality which includes lax articulation and backing of vowels" (Doran in Pavlenko:2004). Doran (2007) has attributed this characteristic to the influence of Arabic phonology. Similarly, borrowings are another highly adopted category in verlan, serving three purposes. First, the mix of the population living in "banlieue" makes it ideal for language exchanges. For example, the common expression "wesh" comes from Algerian Arabic meaning 'what's up?', while "daron" (father) and "daronne" (mother) originate from Romani (Doran:2007). Second, youngsters use borrowing as it relates to their personal experience as minorities in the suburbs. Drawing from the language of rap and reggae music, speakers share a common feeling of marginality, as standard French lacks models "about issues of minority self-definition, emancipation and sociocultural analysis" (Doran:2007). Finally, some borrowing terms are used to talk about illicit activities: "baston", meaning fight, or

² « laisse tomber » = never mind, drop it

³ « pourri » = literally rotten, here, corrupted police officer

⁴ « flics » = the police

“tune”, meaning money, originate from French slang (Doran in Pavlenko:2004); or taboos: ‘joint’ in English, is changed to “oinj” and refers to a hashish cigarette. Thus, some terms go through a semantic shift as the community categorizes its social reality. Verlan often employs a humorous tone, using metaphors to communicate furtively, such as “gazon” (lawn) meaning marijuana or “carte bleue” (credit card) meaning flat-chested female. “Méchant” (mean) equally changed connotation in verlan, as it became “chanmé” (cool), or in the expression “buter un keuf”⁵ which now means killing a police officer (Sloutsky&Black:2008). Another way to change meaning is to re-verlanize a term, for example, “femme” (woman) initially becomes “meuf” (my girlfriend) but switches again to “feume” (woman as a sexual object) (Sloutsky&Black:2008). Through its linguistic variations, verlan not only represents a communicative tool but also a way of defining oneself.

As Auer&Schmidt (2010) notes, “speakers’ perception and recognition of language differences occurred within a spatial framework, which led to an evaluation of language in terms of the basic categories of *own* vs. *other*”. Verlan is thus used to recognize the diversity of “la banlieue”, with a wide range of words to define ethnicity: “Arabe” (Arab) can be beur, reub, reubeu, rabzouille, crouille; “Juif” (Jew) becomes feuj; “noir” (black) is renoi, black, grène; “Marocain” (Moroccan) evolves into camaro; or “bledman”, from Arabic ‘bled’ (homeland, country) (Doran:2007). This open recognition, usually used in a playful way, gives a new positive value to race, generally absent or negated in standard French (Doran in Pavlenko:2004). Moreover, speakers of verlan recognize each other as a part of “la banlieue”. Indeed, this code shows peer allegiance, a mutual understanding, a form of solidarity. Verlan allows its speakers to create a place where their identities can be expressed freely, outside of societal standards but also the family sphere (Doran in Pavlenko:2004). Verlan expresses the bond created within the peer group. Refusing the language spoken within peer interactions means rejecting the community, as verlan marks the boundaries of the group. To be included in the peer universe, speaking verlan is a requirement (Doran in Pavlenko:2004). In addition, this identification within a specific group stresses a sense of belonging, not within an ethnic background, but inside the space of “la banlieue” and its shared foreign status. Standard French imposes a choice between being French and being immigrant. Dominant discourses do not offer positive models of integration in “la banlieue” and assign speakers of verlan as “racaille” (scum) (Doran:2007). Consequently, the speakers created a ‘third space’, where verlan, the alternative universe of discourse, allows the expression of hybrid identities (Doran in Pavlenko:2004). Verlan denotes the existence of a positive multicultural and multilingual place and questions mainstream French reality. Lastly, verlan is a secret code as its rules need to be learned; however, its existence

⁵ « buter » = encountering an obstacle

cannot be separated from French as it only alters some words coming from the popular register (Méla:1991). Its fluent use is reserved for the space and populations of “la banlieue”.

Speakers of verlan separate their zones, considering standard French a synonym of social success (Méla:1991). As Doran (in Pavlenko:2004) puts it, “Verlan is one code among several within youths’ linguistic repertoires”. The speakers’ awareness helps them perform different identities depending on the social spheres in which they participate.

Verlan is, therefore, a sociolect created through the space of “la banlieue” by a marginalized multiethnic population. Its use goes against the language ideology of the French nation-state and creates a new universe of expression and identification. This linguistic device symbolizes a community put on the fringe of society that then creates a ‘third space’ where hybrid identities of immigrant children can be established positively. Today, some verlan terms are widespread throughout generations, but new words are constantly in the making, especially through music. On television, youngsters watch a show called *Les minikeums*⁶; a brand called *Yeka*⁷ sells school supplies; a service named *FeujDating*⁸ organizes speed dating for the Jewish community in Paris (Sloutsky&Black:2008). Although the use of verlan words expanded in society, the most fluent speakers are still considered the most deviant with social rules (Bachmann&Basier:1984). Its use also rises gender issues. As verlan is associated “with tough street culture, it makes it off-limits for females” (Doran in Pavlenko:2004). Such contemporary issues indicate that verlan still has a lot to say.

⁶ « Les mini mecs » = the small dudes

⁷ « cahier » = notebook

⁸ « Juif » = Jew

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Annex 1 – Glossary of common verlan terms used in every day French

Verlan	Literal translation	English literal translation	English verlan translation	Origin
Aps	Pas		Not	Standard French
Beur	Arabe		Arab	Standard French
Bledman			Person from the homeland	Arabic and English
Buter		Encountering an obstacle	Kill	Argot
Camaro	Marocain		Moroccan	Standard French
Chanmé	Méchant	Mean	Cool, awesome	Popular French
Carte bleue		Credit card	Flat-chested female	Argot
Chébran	Branché		Trendy	Popular French
Chelou	Louche		Suspicious	Standard French
Ci-mer	Merci		Thank you	Standard French
Daron			Father	Romani
Einse	Seins		Breasts	Standard French
Feume	Meuf		Sexually objectified woman	Verlan
Feuj	Juif		Jew	Standard French
Fonsdé	Défoncé	Being beat up	Being under the influence of drugs	Popular French
Gazon		Lawn	Marijuana	Argot
lèch / yèch	Chier		Shit, crap	Argot / Injure
Kayra	Racaille		Scum	Popular French
Ken	Niquer	Screw	Having sexual intercourse	Argot / Injure
Keuf	Flic		Cop	Popular French
Keum	Mec		Dude, boyfriend	Popular French
Laisse béton	Laisse tomber		Never mind	Popular French
Meuf	Femme		Woman, girlfriend	Standard French
Narvalo		Stupid, foolish	A guy, a man	Romani
Ouf	Fou	Crazy	Incredible	Popular French

Verlan	French literal translation	English literal translation	English verlan translation	Origin
Oinj	Joint		Hashish hand-rolled cigarette	English
Oilp / oilpé	Poil		Naked	Popular French
Pécho	Chopé	Being caught	Having sexual intercourse	Argot
Tarpé	Pétard		Marijuana hand-rolled cigarette	Popular French
Téma	Mate		Look, check her out	Argot
Teub	Bite		Dick	Popular French
Téci	Cité		Groups of buildings in the suburb	Popular French
Teubé	Bête		Stupid	Popular French
Teuf	Fête		Party	Standard French
Teupu	Pute		Whore	Popular French
Terpa	Par terre		On the floor	Standard French
Rebeu	Beur		Arab	Verlan
Reuf	Frère		Brother	Standard French
Reum	Mère		Mother	Standard French
Renoi	Noir		Black person	Standard French
Ripoux	Pourri	Rotten	Corrupted cop	Popular French
Scrède	Discret		Low-key, subtle	Standard French
Vénère	Enervé		Angry	Standard French
Wam	Moi		Me	Standard French
Wesh			What's up?	Algerian Arabic
Yep	Pied		Foot	Standard French
Yeuv	Vieux		Old person	Popular French
Zarbi	Bizarre		Weird, odd	Popular French
Zikmu	Musique		Music	Standard French
Zyva	Vas-y		Go ahead, come on	Popular French

Annex 2 – Map of city names in Paris and its suburbs

« Ile-de-France: votre bled, c'est quoi son blaze ? »

(Ile-de-France: your hometown, what are its colors?)



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