

WORD PLAY: THE LEXICON IN FRENCH HIP-HOP AND RAP

By

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For Dad, Kitty, and June

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Language is an ever evolving system subjected to both internal and external pressures. As hip-hop and rap continue to gain popularity in France, linguistic forms that once enjoyed exclusive covert prestige, such as argot and verlan, are now beginning to enjoy a more overt prestige amongst the younger generation. In creating their flows (rhyming lyrics), French hip-hop and rap artists tend to truncate, modify, invert syllabic structure, coin new words and phrases, and use extensive borrowing from other languages; mostly American English and Arabic. Utilizing data from the 2011 UF Hip-Hop Corpus, the 2012 Sexion d'Assaut Corpus, and the lyrics from various French hip-hop and rap artists, this thesis examines the potential lasting effect that language creation and change might have on the contemporary French language of the 21st Century.

CHAPTER 1 INTRODUCTION

As an ever evolving entity, language is always subject to both internal and external pressures. As hip-hop and rap continue to gain popularity in France, linguistic forms that once enjoyed exclusive covert prestige, such as argot and verlan, are now beginning to enjoy a more overt prestige amongst the younger generation. Unlike their contemporary counterparts, French hip-hop and rap artists tend to use the entire linguistic repertoire available to them to create their lyrics. In creating their flows (rhyming lyrics), French hip-hop and rap artists tend to truncate, modify, invert syllabic structure, coin new words and phrases, and use extensive borrowing from other languages; mostly American English and Arabic. Not every French hip-hop or rap artist uses these linguistic tools to the same extent and choosing just one artist or group to represent the whole is an impossible task. I have chosen to highlight the highly successful group, Sexion d'Assaut, as their lyrics are rich with all of the above mentioned linguistic tools and to examine their work in relation to other hip-hop and rap artists to explore the notions of hypercorrection, hypocorrection, covert prestige, and overt prestige.

Hypercorrection has long been the norm with respect to the French language, but with the rising popularity and acceptance of French hip-hop and rap music and culture, a greater attitude of tolerance is being fostered and widespread not only toward hypocorrection, but toward formerly covert linguistic forms of prestige. Although usually associated with L2 learners, hypercorrection is also associated with both linguistic and social movement within sociolinguistic classes as speakers from a lower class attempt to communicate in a more formal register, trying to attain the normative referential French standard. It is interesting to note that just like its North American cousin;

hypocorrection and slang are beginning to find their way into everyday language in France. Language related to and influenced by rap and hip-hop associated with the lower class is becoming fashionable within certain social groups in France; a trend that mirrors both the evolution and assimilation of rap and hip-hop culture and language within the United States. France is currently the second largest producer and consumer of hip-hop and rap music, only outdone by the United States of America. This thesis will examine the use of hypocorrection and the lexicon in French hip-hop and rap utilizing tools such as “The 2011 UF Hip-Hop Corpus”, “The UF Sexion d’Assaut Corpus”, and scholarly sources in order to examine the current and future linguistic effects of this ever evolving music genre on the French language.

CHAPTER 2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Materials and Methods

Before research for this thesis began, the need for a corpus from which to draw information was fundamental. As such, research for this thesis began with the collaboration between me, Dr. Hebblethwaite, Jordin Patten at the University of Florida to create a French rap corpus, resulting in data collection of over 800 pages of text comprised of 232,000 words. Each one of us was assigned a group of particular artists and albums from which we were to listen to the music, search for lyrics, and then correct the lyrics that we found. As the official lyrics for the albums were not available to us, we had to rely on fan driven lyric websites such as www.13or-duhiphop.fr/paroles.php, www.rap2france.com, and www.lyricsmania.com/ to establish a base from which to cull French rap and hip-hop lyrics. In the aggregate, these websites represent an enormous data base of French rap texts. At the same time, I created a 188 page corpus encompassing over 67,000 words dedicated exclusively to the work of Sexion d'Assaut as they have been one of the most popular rap groups in France for over four years. The frequency of argot, verlan, and borrowing in their lyrics is elevated as compared to other rap performers and their lyrics proved to be a fertile ground for research. Since the websites are fan driven there were quite a few errors not only in spelling, but in interpretation, and sometimes the fan's ability to understand what the rappers were saying, which led to many hours of listening and re-listening to the songs in order to create reliable transcriptions of the lyrics. When satisfied that the lyrical content of each song was complete, I set about correcting and standardizing spelling mostly via the website, "*Le Dictionnaire de la Zone*" at

www.dictionnairedelazone.fr and via use of David O'Neill's 2007 book, *Explicit Lyrics*. When I encountered words that were not in either of the two preceding sources, I would go to the www.google.fr website and type in the word that I was looking for. Once both the lyrical content and interpretations were correct, Patten and I submitted our work to Dr. Hebblethwaite, who then combined our work to create a unified corpus called the 2011 UF French Hip-Hop Corpus.

Data Extraction

The corpus having been created, I began the task of data extraction by going through the corpus word by word and line by line, searching for the number of occurrences for each word or phrase that contained argot, verlan, or borrowing within the corpus. In order to move more rapidly through the corpus, I utilized the Microsoft word search feature which enabled me to see not only how many times the word (or variant of the word) occurred but where in the corpus it was located. The next task was to identify the number of incidences of hypocorrection within the corpus, which was more painstaking. Hypocorrection is not a new concept but is found in opposition to the standard variety of French taught in the school system and has in the past been found almost exclusively within the familiar register. However, due to increased exposure to the general public through the augmentation of the popularity of French hip-hop and rap, this previously covert form of prestige is beginning to become less stigmatized and more popular. Due to the variation in the spelling of hypocorrected words and phrases, the Microsoft word search function was unable to assist me, and the research required a line by line, word for word manual search. With respect to etymology and word borrowing, "*Le Dictionnaire de la Zone*" was quite useful as the information was often provided with the entries.

CHAPTER 3 HYPERCORRECTION AND HYPOCORRECTION

Hypercorrection

“Toward the second half of the 12th Century, it became preferable to avoid all that was particular to a particular region in favor of identifying oneself with Parisian French”, the language of the King’s Court (Walter 1988:88). It was at this time that all local dialects were pushed to the background in order to emulate the King’s speech (Walter 1988:88). It wasn’t until 1530 that the “first grammar of French was written in English by Palsgrave” and not until 1550 that the “first grammar of French was written in French by Meigret” that distinguished between the “good and poor usage of French as well as a proposed written form that approximated the pronunciation” (Walter 1988:88). The first part of the 17th Century was spent formulating rules, formalizing orthography, and “normalizing pronunciation” (Walter 1988:89). Founded in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu, l’Académie française’s mission was to watch over and control “the evolution of the language as well as to create its own grammar and above all the creation of a dictionary” (Walter 1988:90). It was against the Academy’s dictionary that the determination of either good or poor usage of the language was decreed. It was not until “Monday, May 8th, 1673 that the academicians finally adopted a spelling system unique to the French language” (Walter 1988:101). Although the goal was to standardize the French language in grammar, spelling, and pronunciation, it was done at the expense of many of the local dialects and ultimately led to their extinction. In creating a standardized language based on the French spoken in the King’s court, all other varieties became marginalized. After the French Revolution, in 1794, Bishop Grégoire of Blois proposed that the “language of liberty” (Walter 1988:105) be used to unite the

French and expressed his intentions to “annihilate the local dialects to universalize the usage of the French language” (Walter 1988:105). However, it wasn’t until after World War I that the French taught in schools became the common, everyday language. The French armed forces were forced to put their local dialects aside and “to speak in the standard French learned in school” (Walter 1988:106) in order to communicate with each other. Upon their return home, the soldiers “continued to speak in standard French, and their children had fewer occasions to hear the regional dialect” (Walter 1988:106), leading simultaneously to the augmentation of the usage of standard French, and the stigmatization of local dialects.

In an effort to attain normative referential French pronunciation and grammar, both L2 speakers and speakers of French dialects not adhering to the normative referential French model have the tendency to manifest a phenomenon called hypercorrection in their speech. In general, hypercorrection is the product of “linguistic insecurity” (Calvet 2009:53) in which a speaker is over-careful in trying to attain a specific, standardized ‘norm’. In an attempt to attain normative referential French, a speaker has the tendency to overcorrect himself, leading to even greater errors in grammar and pronunciation. In English, common examples of hypercorrection include the incorrect use of the subject pronoun ‘I’ for ‘me’, ‘lay’ for ‘lie’, and ‘who’ for ‘whom’. One finds hypercorrection most often in a linguistic situation in which “a central feature of a speaker’s communicative competence is the capacity to modify speech in the presence of others, to shift styles according to the situation of use” (Lodge 2001:13). The “social consequences of prescriptive attitudes to language are in fact far-reaching: since speakers of the

standard tend to be credited with greater intelligence, trustworthiness, etc., than those who cannot 'rise above' the other varieties" (Lodge 2001:12).

The social status of a dialect is also linked to the political and economic power of the people who speak it (Lodge 2001:19). Language not only serves as a simple means of communication but also has a great bearing on both one's personal and group identities. Social groups utilize language as a way of defending their identity as well as a way to both augment and preserve power (Lodge 2001:24). Although the tendency toward prestigious normative referential French has shaped the foundation for hypercorrection, a relatively new linguistic phenomenon in the late 20th and early 21st Centuries seems to be manifesting within France and within the French language: hypocorrection. Although William Labov's concept of covert prestige is not new, the acceptance and usage of hypocorrected forms in French by the media, artists, and a large portion of the general population in contemporary France is becoming more common. As such, the covert linguistic forms presented through French hip-hop and rap lyrics are less apt to remain covert for long as they are more readily accepted by the youth culture from all walks of life. Looking forward, one has to wonder if the acceptance of hypocorrected speech signifies a greater tolerance of immigration and immigrant languages by the French and the willingness to integrate and assimilate these cultures?

Hypocorrection and Covert Prestige

The words that one chooses as well as the phrases that one utilizes are a linguistic marker of identity indicating class, social status, and level of education attained. The use of hypocorrection indicates a familiar, uneducated register, regarded as socially unacceptable by the upper and middle classes. Hypocorrection and covert

prestige occur in the familiar register and demonstrate the tendency toward knowingly deviating from the normative referential variety of a given language. Hypercorrection is most often exhibited by the working class attempting to speak in a more formal, unfamiliar register and is regarded as a sign of “linguistic insecurity” (Calvet 2009:53). Although hypercorrection is regarded as a sign of linguistic insecurity, there is no data supporting the hypothesis that hypocorrection demonstrates linguistic security. It is important to note that the lexicon of spoken language evolves before the acceptance of the new elements of the lexicon in written form. Today, French youth from the middle and working classes seem to be trending toward an oral form of hypocorrection instead of hypercorrection with respect to spoken French amongst peers, although normative referential French is still the most widely accepted written form of the language.

At the beginning of the 21st Century, the greatest influence on the French language comes from the contact between the French language and immigrant languages, especially Arabic, and American English. In addition to these external linguistic pressures on the French language, internal pressures such as argot, verlan, and the adoption of extensive word borrowing have resulted in a rapidly changing lexicon and tendency toward hypocorrection rather than hypercorrection. Music and lyrics have often served the dual purpose of being both a way of expressing oneself as well as influencing and introducing new verbal forms into a given lexicon as they can be viewed as a direct reflection of the society that produces them. In the 21st Century, this is most noticeably achieved in the French language through the phenomenon of French hip-hop and rap. With the popularity of French rap on the rise, this music form has served as a vehicle for the normalization and adoption of the previously stigmatized

deviation from normative referential French by the classes that would have otherwise shunned it and one has to wonder what if any permanent effect this will have on contemporary French. In essence, French hip-hop and rap have paved the way for hypocorrected words and phrases to enter the everyday lexicon. If this is indeed the case, one must ask what the long term impact of hypocorrection will be on the French language?

The following examples from Lodge (2001:247) demonstrate the difference between a question in the normative referential variety of French and a hypocorrected version of the same question.

Où est-ce que tu vas?

Where are you going ?

Que tu vas ?

Where are you going?

The first example is typical of what any L2 learner would learn in class or that any person speaking French in the normative referential variety would recognize as a standard question form. However, in the hypocorrected version of the question, the word for 'Where' (*Où*) has been omitted and the French question word *est-ce que* is truncated to *Que*. Although the second example might get the point across in a rudimentary fashion, it is certainly not in correct grammatical form according standard, prescriptive French. However, the other form is more economical as it decreases the syllable count from six syllables in the standard French form to three syllables in the hypocorrected form while still getting the message across to the listener.

je veux m'asseoir mais il y a que le banc des accusés.

I want to sit down but the only bench is the one of the accused.

j'veux m'asseoir mais y'a que le banc des accusés.

I want to sit down but the only bench is the one of the accused.

(Sexion d'Assaut, 75 Degrés)

Lines three and four highlight the difference between normative referential French and hypocorrective lyrics from Sexion d'Assaut's song, *75 Degrés*. The first example is constructed in the normative referential French form with 'je veux' pronounced [ʒəvø] and 'il y a' pronounced [ilija]. In example number four there are two occurrences of hypocorrection within the phrase. In the case of 'je veux', the schwa is discarded and the pronoun 'je' contracts with the verb, 'veux', to form the single syllable, [vø]. This contraction also changes the production of the first phoneme from /ʒ/ to /j/. With respect to 'il y a' [ilija], the pronoun 'il' is discarded completely leaving [ija]. Although the loss of the pronoun in its entirety in this case does not affect the pronunciation of the rest of the construction, the rejection of the schwa in 'je' changes the pronunciation of the first phoneme from /ʒ/ to /j/. An analysis of both the UF 2011 Hip-Hop Corpus and the Sexion d'Assaut Corpus reveal that the elision of /ə/ occurs frequently within French rap and most commonly after 'je', 'le', 'me', 'ce' and 'te' in oral French. In most cases, where it is possible that elision can occur in French hip-hop and rap, it does. Hip-hop and rap artists utilize the popular register to appeal to and connect to their targeted demographic, mostly immigrants and the working class. It is possible that through their lyrics, rappers employ hypocorrection more than the average popular French dialect speaker to bring their lyrics to life and to give the rappers street credibility. By utilizing

the popular register, the artists are attempting to forge solidarity with their audience through a shared, common language.

A common language is very important in creating and reinforcing a nation's identity. Although customs may change from one part of a country to the next, language serves as a unifying force in forging a national identity for its citizens. As the popularity of hip-hop and rap music continues to augment in France, one has to wonder if the hypocorrection found in French hip-hop and rap lyrics might eventually serve to diminish national French unity and identity as more and more people stop struggling to attain the referential normative variety of 'good French'. Traditionally, the inability to attain and produce standard French by immigrants and the working class has served as both a class and identity marker enabling those who speak the normative referential variety of French to stigmatize and discriminate against the working class. However, today the *verlan*, *argot*, and the practice of borrowing words from other languages found in French rap have come to serve as a new linguistic code for French youth who have been excluded by those who speak the prestigious form of standard French. The use of hypocorrected French as opposed to hypercorrected French as well as *argot*, *verlan*, and borrowing from other languages, are all common in the popular dialects of the working class and aim to exclude those who have previously been excluded on the basis of their linguistic unconformity.

This sudden role reversal has become worrisome not only for the Académie française, but for anyone who works to preserve the purity of the French language and culture by rejecting word infiltration from other dialects as well as other languages. According to Lodge, English speakers tend to underestimate the importance of the

normative referential version of French as a “symbol of identity and national unity in France” (Lodge 2001:260) as we do not have an official language in the United States of America and might not understand the ties between linguistic and national heritage. Therefore, the concept of national identity being so closely tied to a specific language might seem peculiar to the average American. To explore the notion of French hypocorrection and its implication for the French language, I will use French hip-hop and rap. Utilizing this material will allow me to use French hip-hop and rap as a base of reference to explore various forms of hypocorrection such as argot, verlan, and extensive word borrowings from languages other than French.

CHAPTER 4 ARGOT

History

Argot is a language designed specifically to exclude the non-initiated or to distinguish its speakers from others through word and phrase encryption. It is argot's cryptic nature that distinguishes argot from any other type of speech (Sourdou 2002:29). The necessity of encrypting a message and to retain information within a specified group of initiates, is what Sourdou (2002:29) claims to be the reason for the birth of argot. Although Guiraud has traced argot back to the twelfth century, the first written documentation of argot is attributed to the fifteenth century when the world of organized crime began to emerge in Paris (Guiraud 1985:10). While undergoing torture in France, a group called the Coquillards revealed to their torturers what is considered to be the first glossary of argot dating back to 1455 (Sloutsky and Black 2008:310). In the nineteenth century, authors such as Balzac wrote often about crime and utilized argot in their writing to lend authenticity to their character's parlance (Sloutsky and Black 2008:310). Although many believe argot to be a relatively new form and/or register of speech that originated amongst the working class needing to create a vocabulary specific to their jobs and social networks, this particular type of hypocorrected speech is rooted much deeper in France's linguistic history. Although many consider the technical words and phrases that the working class created to communicate with each other more efficiently as argot, in essence what the working class created was a technolect not argot.

Technolect and Argot

A technolect and argot are not to be confused as they do not fulfill the same functions within a given speech community. Argot is an encrypted form of speech designed to exclude those who are not part of an initiated group whereas a technolect is designed to facilitate communication between members of a given community and is readily shared with those outside of the immediate speech community. Another important difference between a technolect and argot is that the terminology associated with a technolect tends to be relatively stable until a new technology is introduced into the speech community whereas argot is constantly evolving due to its encrypted nature.

Once an argotic term or phrase has lost its secretive nature, another encrypted term or phrase must be created to replace it in order for members of a given speech community to continue to exclude non-initiated. For example, if a given speech community is often monitored by the police, the members of that speech community might create an encrypted language in which the police are excluded from understanding what is being said. However, when the argotic phrase or word becomes understood by law enforcement, the speech community must create a newly encrypted word or phrase to replace it. It is within the constant cycle of encryption/discovery/re-encryption that argot is being recycled, refined, and renewed.

Tables 4-1 through 4-3 have been adapted from Sourdoot (2002:38) to illustrate and highlight the differences between argot and a technolect. It is of interest to note that with the exception of the apocope criterion, the two types of speech are diametrically opposed to one another.

In order to exclude others, argot must change on a regular basis lest those excluded from the group become knowledgeable about that group's communications. A

group's identity is often associated with the type of speech, or words, that they utilize. A speech community will utilize argot as a sign of both recognition and acceptance to and within a specific group.

Argot in Contemporary France

Today's schoolyards in France are full of children creating, utilizing and contributing to the lexicon of argot. Heavily influenced by older siblings and by the ever increasing popularity of French rap and rap culture, argot can be found on any campus in France. Although students are still taught to attain the normative standardized version of French and are encouraged to do so within the classroom, during a class break or during recess, argot can be heard in varying degrees peppering the speech of young learners. On a recent trip to Paris, I had the privilege of observing students at the prestigious Légion d'Honneur high school located in the 20th *arrondissement* in Paris. The girls only utilize the normative referential French deemed acceptable by the Académie française within the classroom. However, during their free time and even at lunch, argot slips easily in and out of their everyday speech patterns. It is interesting to note that in this case, the girls utilize argot for a dual purpose; the first purpose is to exclude the other girls and eavesdroppers from their conversation and the second in an effort to demonstrate that they are "cool" in being able to both understand and utilize the register and lexicon of the working class. Although this type of language is disdained when communicating with family members, there is a growing desire amongst the youth of the aristocracy to communicate amongst themselves with lower class speech. Today in the context of French hip-hop and rap, we see linguistic diffusion from the bottom up as the covert prestige of argot and verlan are no longer uncommon in the middle and upper classes as well as within the aristocracy. As an example of this phenomenon

occurring at the dawn of the 20th Century, de La Grassière (1907:45) notes that it is more fashionable to say “mille balles” instead of “mille francs” and “la galette” for “l’argent”.

According to Sourdou (1991:14), argot has its own lexicon, and is a “social communicative activity within the interior of a specific group”. There is a need to continually alter argot to “preserve its cryptic quality”. For example, a French term like *beur* was once considered argot as it was a cryptic way to refer to a young French Arab born of immigrant parents. However, as its usage became more widespread and eventually worked its way into everyday French, *beur* lost its status as a word of argot because its meaning is well known, even used by the media, and it is no longer cryptic. According to Ayné (1930:26), argot is the most difficult register of a living language to master because it is ever changing. Bachmann and Basier (1984:172) identify the following four functions of argot:

1. A word game
2. A social ritual that requires initiation
3. Encryption
4. Defiance and solidarity

Truncation and Reduplication

Truncation of word forms is an important aspect of argot as it acts to shorten the number of syllables required to encrypt a message. Truncation is perhaps the most basic and easiest form of argot to understand and employ to the non-initiated. In French, truncation is most often achieved by way of apocope, eliminating the final syllable(s) of a word and occurs most often in the familiar register. However, it is not uncommon to find truncation by apheresis in which the first syllable or syllables are

removed from the first part of the word. Common examples of truncation in the French language include the following examples:

ciné for *cinéma*
le bac for *le baccalauréat*
manif for *manifestation*
prof for *professeur*
bus for *autobus*

The truncated form of many French words becomes the basis for the verlanized form of the word which will be discussed in detail in Chapter 5. Reduplication of truncated forms also occurs in French hip-hop and rap. With previously covert words being exposed at an increasing rate through the popularity of French hip-hop and rap, occasional reduplication occurs in an effort to re-encrypt a specific word. One of the most commonly reduplicated words in French hip-hop is rap are *ter ter*. *Ter* is a truncated form of the French word *territoire* for the place or territory in which one sells drugs (Le Dictionnaire de la Zone). Not only has the word *territoire* undergone truncation, but it has also been reduplicated.

Argot and Immigration

French hip-hop and rap enjoy a specialized lexicon and have made argot readily accessible to the masses and even fashionable for those who would otherwise be excluded from the initiated speech community. Online access to rap videos, rap fan sites and even online rap dictionaries, have served to augment interest in French hip-hop and rap music, French rap vocabulary as it pertains to argot, and the rap lifestyle. Recurring themes within French rap such as drugs and alcohol, sex, misogyny, violence, cars, family, death, religion, law and dystopia have provided ample breeding grounds for lexical evolution. After careful examination of the 2011 UF French Hip-Hop

Corpus and the Sexion d'Assaut corpus, it is interesting to note that the greatest contribution to the argot utilized by rappers rapping in French is borrowed from the Arabic language. It is important to understand that the majority of recent immigration in France has come from African countries that utilize French as an official language as well as former French colonies in Africa such as Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia; all countries with strong ties to the Arabic language, culture and Islamic religion. Many of France's most successful French rappers come from immigrant backgrounds and embrace the Muslim religion and culture or were brought up in neighborhoods with strong cultural and ethnic ties to the Arabic language and culture. For example, the rap group Sexion d'Assaut's eight members include those born in Zaire, Guinea, the Ivory Coast, and France. Of the eight members that constitute the group, only Maska's parents were born in France. In a corpus analysis performed on the 2011 UF Hip-Hop Corpus by Patten, it is interesting to note that of the 20 rap groups represented, 10 of the groups had a member or members born outside of France in such countries as Morocco, Senegal, the Congo, Cameroon, the Ivory Coast, Mali, Guinea, Zaire, the Comoros Islands, Haiti, and Argentina. Table 4-5 is a modified version of Patten's analysis. The table above indicates the name of the rapper or rap group, their gender and country of origin. Of the twenty rappers or rap groups, half of them immigrated to France from other countries with Africa being represented the most heavily.

Table 4-6 lists the most recurrent argot terms found in Sexion d'Assaut's album, *L'école des points vitaux*, in descending order for each word. Where gender is ascribed to a noun, I have indicated it next to the noun as either m (masculine) or f (feminine). The argotic word is indicated at the far left, followed by its English translation, and the

frequency of occurrences of each word within the lyrics of the album. All of the argotic terms listed below were verified at the website, www.dictionnairedelazone.fr, for both spelling and meaning.

Of the 25 most widely used argotic terms in Sexion d'Assaut's *L'école des points vitaux*, it is interesting to note that several of the terms utilized are merely variations on common themes, indicating the importance of these topics to the everyday life of not only themselves, but their listeners as well. According to the corpus, the most important thing to establish within the world of hip-hop and rap is one's identity. For example, the word *Paname* is the most commonly used word in the corpus at 25 occurrences, garnering 19.5% of the 128 instances of recurrent word usage and when coupled with the words *tiek* at 3.9% of the corpus, and the word *baraque* as it pertains to a domicile (2.3%), represents 25.8% of the of the 128 occurrences of recurrent words within the Sexion d'Assaut corpus. It is clear from the information presented above, that the specific neighborhood within a city to which one belongs is of great importance in establishing one's identity. According to the Sexion d'Assaut corpus, after identifying where one resides, the next most important marker of identity is identifying and describing with whom one associates. Within the corpus examined, between both the singular and plural forms of the word for friend (*poto/potes*), a total of 19 occurrences garner 14.8% of the most recurrent words in the corpus indicating that friendship and belonging to a particular group are important sociological and linguistic factors that not only establish but maintain one's identity.

With respect to categorizing the importance of recurrent themes throughout the Sexion d'Assaut corpus pertaining to the album *L'école des points vitaux*, several

interesting elements come to light that are not indicated within the table above. For example, when referring to one's family (*daron/daronne*) the father figure is never referred to in a positive way. Often the father figure is despised and is accused of abandoning the family and being the root of all familial problems. If the father is present within the family he is referred to as a drunk, a drug user, abusing family members, and being unemployed. In the following example from Booba's *Ouest side*, the father in *Je me souviens* exemplifies the type of violence often associated with a father figure in hip-hop and rap.

Parc'que le soir mon daron cognait ma daronne, s'prenait pour Mike Tyson.

Because my father knocks my mom around at night, thinks he's Mike Tyson.

In contrast, the mother figure is revered and if lyrics are not praising her directly, the lexicon utilized expresses the author's angst about how difficult life is for the mother and how she struggles to make ends meet.

Because of argot's easy accessibility through rap and other media, many words have slipped almost effortlessly from the category of argot into everyday speech. Estelle Liogier (2002:43) cites the example of the word *bouffon* which translates roughly as "buffoon" or "court jester" in American English. With respect to *bouffon* as utilized in the current sense with respect to argot, it can mean several different things depending on its usage as a noun, adjective, or as an intransitive verb. As Liogier (2002:43) explains, in 2002 the argotic use of *bouffon* as a noun translated to the American English equivalent, 'creep'. However, upon further investigation in 2012, it was discovered to have additional meanings in its argotic form. Ten years after Liogier published her article in 2002, *bouffon* can also now mean a white or red bean, someone that cannot

be taken seriously, someone who smokes dope, a glutton, or someone who is over zealous. As an adjective, *bouffon* can be used to describe someone or something in a caricatural way, as grotesque, farcical or zealous. As an intransitive verb, *bouffoner* means to act like a fool (Dictionnaire de la zone). The evolution of the word *bouffon* over the last decade is a classic example of an argotic word undergoing semantic change and that unlike a technolect, argot is not semantically stable and must forever be in a state of evolution to retain its cryptic status. Although argot is the focus of the discussion here, it must be understood that languages are living entities that undergo constant change producing linguistic changes that can either be temporary or permanent.

Table 4-1. Technolect and argot – functional, dynamic, syntax

	Criteria						
	Functional			Dynamic		Syntax	
	Cryptic	Identity	Play	Economic	Changing	Stable	Change class
argot	+	+	+	-	+	-	+
technolect	-	-	-	+	-	+	-

Table 4-2. Technolect and argot – semantic and word borrowing

	Criteria				
	Semantic			Word borrowing	
	Metaphor	Metonym	Synonym	Polysemy	False borrowing
argot	+	+	+	+	+
technolect	-	-	-	-	-

Table 4-3. Technolect and argot - formal

	Criteria						
	Formal						
	Composition	Derivation	Apocope	Apherisis	Redoubling	Verlan	Sigle
argot	+	-	+	+	+	+	+
technolect	-	+	+	-	-	-	-

Table 4-4. The members of Sexion d'Assaut and their cultural ties.

Stage Name	Real name	Birthplace	Country in which he grew up	Parents' country of origin
Maître Gims	Gandhi Bilel	Kinshasa,	France	Democratic Republic of the
	Djuna	Zaire		Congo
Lefa	Karim Fall	France	France	Senegal and Morocco
Doomams	Mamadou	Guinea	France	Guinea
	Baldé			
Black	Alpha Diallo	France	France	Guinea
Mesrimes				
Barack Adama	Adama Diallo	France	France	Senegal and Guadeloupe
Maska	Bastien Vincent	France	France	France
JR O Chrome	Karim Ballo	France	France	Mali
L.I.O	Lionel Dahi	Ivory Coast	France	Ivory Coast
Petrodollars				

Table 4-5. Patten's list of gender and origin of artists in the UF 2011 French Hip-Hop Corpus

Artist	Gender	Country of Origin
Oi Kainry	Male	France
La Fouine	Male	Morocco
Keny Arkana	Female	Argentina
IAM	Male	France
Booba	Male	France
Canardo	Male	Morocco
Rohff	Male	France
Disiz La Peste	Male	France
Mister You	Male	France
La Rumeur	Male	France
Bams	Female	Cameroon
Diams	Female	France
Black Barbie	Female	France
Soprano	Male	Comoros Islands
MC Solaar	Male	Senegal
Oxmo Puccino	Male	Mali
Abd Al Malik	Male	Congo
Kery James	Male	Haiti
Lunatic (Booba's rap group)	Male	France
Sexion D'Assaut	Male	Guinea, France, Ivory Coast, Zaire

Table 4-6. The 25 most recurrent argotic terms in Sexion d'Assaut's *L'école des points vitaux*

Word	English translation	Frequency
Paname	Paris	25
poto (m)	friend	10
potes (m/p)	friends	9
hass (f)	troubles	8
caisse (f)	car	8
taf (m)	work, job	6
baraque (m)	either house or a muscle bound person depending on the context	6
tiek (m)	neighborhood – apocope of the verlanization of “quartier”	5
tune/thune (f)	money	5
daronne (f)	mother	4
daron (m)	father	4
gueuche (m)	Drugged/stoned - apocope of the verlanization of schlague (<i>gueuchla</i>)	4
flinguer	to kill with a gun	4
sbars (m)	a cigarette of cannabis or haschich	4
se barrer	to leave/ to go	3
guesh (m)	Portuguese - Apheresis of the French word for Portuguese (portugais)	3
nique	to fuck	3
molo	doucement	3
clope (m/f)	cigarette	3
carotte (f)	a theft by ruse, cheating, or being duped	3
fric (m)	money	2
naze (m/f)	an idiot or someone who is very tired	2
gamos (m)	car	2
oseille	money	2

Table 4-7. The most recurrent themes with associated argotic terms in Sexion d'Assaut's *L'école des points vitaux*

Category	Words	Occurrences	Percentage of the 128 occurrences
Place of residence	Paname, tiek, baraque	33	25.8
Friends	poto/potes	19	14.8
Descriptions of people	baraque/guesh	12	9.4
Cars	naze/gueuche/ caisse/gamos	10	7.8
Money	fric/oseille/thune	9	7
Trouble	hass	8	6.3
Familial relations	daron/daronne	8	6.3
Committing a crime	flinguer/carrotte	7	5.5
Smoking (cigarettes or drugs)	clope/sbars	7	5.5
Work	taf	6	4.7
To fuck	nique	3	2.3
To leave/go	se barrer	3	2.3
The adverb "softly"	molo	3	2.3
Total:	25	128	100.0

CHAPTER 5 VERLAN

History

Verlan is a type of argot that involves the permutation, rearrangement, and sometimes creation of syllables within a given word. According to Sourdou (2002:37), verlan was used much less at the dawn of the 1980s. Using verlan is first and foremost a question of register. The use of verlan is considered a familiar register, even vulgar at times, and even though Méla (2000:29) states that verlan is rarely more than a coded form of standard referential French, she does not take into account the influence of immigrant languages on the contemporary French lexicon, especially as it pertains to verlanized words. Initially associated with beggars, and criminals, verlan has been recorded in official trial records dating as far back as 1837. The two examples from the trial involving a Mr. Vidocq are in reference to the prince to whom he refers to as *Linspré* (le Prince) and *Lorcefé* (a prison at La Force) (Bachmann and Basier 1984:173). Although these examples may not appear to be straightforward examples of contemporary argot, deconstruction enables us to see the mechanics of how Mr. Vidocq arrived at these verlanized words. For the first example, *Linspré*, it is essential to begin with the word in its traditional form: *le prince* [ləprɛ̃s].

The first transformation occurs when Vidocq drops the schwa in the definite article, *le*.

lprince [lprɛ̃s]

The next step reveals that the word *prince* has been rewritten in a form reflecting the approximate phonetic transcription of the word and inverted to render the phonetic equivalent *inspr*.

l inspr [lɛspr]

Because the French language prefers open syllables in the style, V CV, or CV CV, Vidocq adds an 'e' to the end of the verlanized word which makes it easier to pronounce and further obscures the original meaning of the word.

inspré [ɛ spre]

V CV

When the article is agglutinated to the new noun form, *le prince* has transformed into its verlanized form, *linspré*.

linspré [lɛspre]

Le prince ləprɛs → lprɛs → lɛspr → lɛspre → *linspré*

The second example of verlan offered by Vidocq is the word *lorcéfé*, originally *La Force* [lafɔrs]. In deconstructing the verlanization of this noun, Vidocq utilizes a similar method of verlanization. The first step in the transformation of *La Force* into *lorcéfé* occurs when Vidocq drops the letter *a* from the definite article, *la*.

l force [lɔrs]

The next step reveals that the word *force* has been rewritten in a form reflecting the approximate phonetic transcription of the word and inverted to render the phonetic equivalent *lorsf*.

l orsf [lɔrsf]

Once again as the French language prefers open syllables in the style, V CV, or CV CV, Vidocq not only adds an *e* to the end of the verlanized word but he inserts a

schwa between the *c* and the *f* which again makes it easier to pronounce and further obscures the original meaning of the word.

lorsefé [lɔ rsə fe]
CV CV CV

La Force [lafɔRS] → [lɔRSf] → [lɔRSəfe] → *lorcéfé*

Another example of early verlanization is given in Calvet's *L'Argot* when he explains that people in 1585 spoke in secrecy about the French king by verlanizing the king's last name, Bourbon, so as not to be imprisoned. They utilized the word *bonbour* to designate the Bourbon king. During the second half of the eighteenth century, Louis XV [luikɛ̃z] became known as *Sequinzeouil* [sekɛ̃zvil] by his detractors (Calvet 2009:60). It is interesting to note that in this example of argot, the French word for fifteen, *quinze*, stays intact while the word Louis is inverted, split in half and appears on either side of *quinze*. If we begin with the original form of the name, the deconstruction and transformation of *sequinzeouil* would begin with *Louis XV (quinze)* [luikɛ̃z]. If we extract the word *quinze* we are left with the proper name, Louis.

Louis XV (quinze) [luikɛ̃z] → [lui]

The next step is to divide the name, which would seem at the outset a simple task. However, the verlanists of the time chose to add a schwa at the end of Louis' name stabilizing an otherwise latent *s*. In adding the schwa and pronouncing the *s*, the verlanists essentially changed the masculine name Louis [lui] into its feminine

counterpart, Louise [luiz]. It is possible that this was done purposefully to add additional insult to the king but also served to further obscure the name Louis.

Louis [lui] → Louise [luiz]

Making the latent *s* stable also aided in division of the syllables as well as pronunciation of the name in its final verlanized form. Because the schwa occurs at the end of the word, the speaker has the option to pronounce it or not and in this case the schwa is pronounced in the verlanized form of Louise.

Louise [luizə] → Zeloui [zəlui]

However, the verlanists did not stop there. Instead, they chose to transform the new form of the name again, reverlanizing the second half of Louis' name to further obscure it, as it now ends with an *l*.

zeloui [zəlui] → zeouil [zəuil]

When this last form is divided and the word *quinze* reinserted, we end up with *Sequinzeouil*. It is important to note, however, that during the last transformation, instead of retaining the *z* sound of the *s* that the schwa provides, the *s* reverts back to its original pronunciation as an *s*.

zeouil [zəuil] → zequinzeouil [zəkɛ̃zuil] → *Sequinzeouil* [sekɛ̃zuil]

According to Sloutsky (2008:314), the famous French writer, Voltaire, created his name as a verlanized form of the French town he was born in. The name of town where Voltaire was born was called Air-vault. In a simple reversal of syllables, Air-vault

becomes *Votlaire*. However, *aolt* in French is pronounced *o* in American English, the *lt* being silent and it is clear that Voltaire chose to pronounce the *t* in the verlanized form of Air-Vault. The addition of the *t* also makes the name easier to pronounce.

Air-vault [ɛRVO] → Vault-air [vɔltɛR] → Voltaire [vɔltɛR]

One of the difficulties in mastering verlan is that at any given time many variations exist as it is not a standardized variety of the language and is ever evolving. For example, there are dialectal variations of verlan based on where one lives in the city, the composition of immigrant populations, as well as verlan associated with specific neighborhoods (Méla 2000:31). Verlan is often used to code references to sex, drugs, crimes and fighting and the emotions most often coded in verlan are those associated with anger, shame, pity, or even joy in some cases (Méla 2000:31). The most widely accepted theory of the origins of the word *verlan* is that it was taken from the French word *l'envers*, meaning 'inverse'. However, Natalie Lefkowitz (1989:312) offers another possible origin of the word *verlan* as an "inversion of the term *langue verte*". The term *langue verte* is used to describe part of the lowest register of speech normally associated with the working class and immigrants, and is considered to be quite vulgar and unacceptable by the speakers of the more formal normative referential variety of French. Verlan often disguises and softens its vulgar aspect by the recoding of its syllabic structure.

Linguistic Function

Verlan serves many linguistic functions, the first and foremost being that of a secret, and codified language. Just as important as being a secret language of sorts, verlan allows disenfranchised youth the opportunity to differentiate themselves and

establish an identity apart from those who speak normative referential French while still maintaining ties to the French language in verlanizing the normative referential French lexicon. Not only does verlan serve as a linguistic code defining exclusion from and inclusion in a specific group, but it also serves as an assault against adults as it gives the speaker the power to confuse, control, or dominate the discourse between an authority figure and a subordinate. Verlan is also a way for students who are failing in the French school system, as well as failing to learn and master the normative referential variety of French, to excel in expressing their creativity through word games with the normative referential standard version of French, thereby exacting a sort of revenge against the system that marginalizes them (Méla 1997:31).

When it comes to the gender of French nouns, gender traits are generally disregarded when it comes to the verlanization of a word, usually in favor of the masculine form (Méla 1997:28). The phonetic changes in both noun and verb usage render verlan nearly impossible to understand by the non-initiated. When undergoing verlanization, verbs are often rendered unrecognizable to many non-initiated Francophones as the verbs lose their recognizable endings and the root of the verb becomes an infix (Méla 1997:28). For example, in its infinitive form the French verb *marcher* (to work) becomes *chémar*. In a phrase made famous by French slam artist, Grand Corps Malade from his song, “Ça peut chémar”, the phrase, “ça peut marcher” (That could work) became *ça peut chémar*, and confused the non-initiated for quite some time. In examining the structure of the verb *marcher* [marʃe], it is typical of any –er verb: the verb root is *march* and the infinitive verb ending is –er.

marcher → *march* -er

However, before undergoing verlanization, the -er ending is dropped in favor of a truncated phonetic spelling of the ending.

march → -er → é *marché*

When the verb is finally verlanized, it becomes unrecognizable as a verb in its infinitive form by those who speak normative referential French. Although *marché* is the past participle of *marcher*, it does not make sense within the phrase if used as a past participle.

marché [marʃe] → *chémar* [ʃemar]

There is a lack of verlanization pertaining to intellectual pursuits while action verbs and verbs associated with movement are often verlanized (Méla 1997:31). For example, the French verb *mater* [mate] (to watch) undergoes the same process as the verb *marcher* with respect to modification, truncation, and verlanization to become *téma* [tema] in its verlanized form.

mater [mate] → *mate* [mate] → *téma*

It is interesting to note that in recent years, verlan has not only been used with the normative referential variety of French to create new words, but has been known to incorporate Arabic, African languages, Vietnamese, Eastern European languages, and creoles. On one side of the equation, it could indicate a possible distancing from not only the standard variety of the French language, but French culture in general. Another perspective might indicate that those utilizing the familiar register are more willing to

assimilate diverse languages and groups into their sphere of influence than the speakers of normative referential French. On a psychological level, verlan is perceived as an attack on normative referential French, as words are and phonetic sounds are changed aggressively. Ethnic pronunciations such as Arabic affrication abound, creating an imagined, aggressive sound to the language when heard by users of the normative referential variety of French. (Méla 1997:31).

From a sociological perspective the adoption of the *banlieue* or *cité* (equivalent to the term 'projects' in American English) accent symbolizes for out of group speakers a certain degree of identification with the street culture that is common to all French speakers in the banlieue (Jamin 2006:169). However, Lefkowitz (1989:317) has identified the following situations in which it is considered inappropriate to use verlan:

1. In public and/or potentially formal settings
2. With authority figures or figures worthy of respect
3. With the non-initiated
4. For serious behavior

According to Martinet (1968), Guiraud (1979), and Cohen (1919), verlan parallels argot or slang in the following ways:

1. Unusual phonological combinations
2. Systemic deformation of morphemes
3. Tendency toward truncation
4. Free linguistic borrowing from foreign languages
5. Doubling of vocabulary
6. Metaphorization (the use of images, symbols, and implicit comparisons, in a non-literal context)
7. Oral nature

Verlan and Immigration

The great number of North African immigrants as compared to other migrant populations, and their earlier arrival in the French cities explains their greater linguistic

influence on other migrant populations sharing the same space (Jamin 2004:175). The covert prestige that street culture conveys coupled with intense peer pressure within adolescent peer groups are important factors influencing the acceptance and practice of the *banlieue* accent (Jamin 2004:172). According to Méla (1997:31), the incorporation of words from other languages into verlan is a way for marginalized immigrant youth to establish a connection between their (or their parents') country of origin, culture, and language while maintaining ties with the country they are now living in as well as the French language. It is primarily marginalized Arab, male youth who see themselves as the innovators of these linguistic word games and phenomena. In an excerpt from Bachmann and Basier (1984:174), the following excerpt was uttered by a twelve year old girl born in Africa but currently living in Goussainville, a depressed area north of Paris near the Charles de Gaulle airport with a heavy immigrant population. This excerpt from Bachmann and Basier (1984:174) demonstrates the frequency with which the subject utilizes verlan in her speech. The first line is her verlanized phrase, the second line of the excerpt is the normative referential variety of French, and the third line of the excerpt is the translation from standard French to American English.

Ziva. T'en néco des oms?

Vas-y. Tu en connais des mots?

Let's go. Do you know some words?

Verlan and the Media

At the end of the 1980s, verlan became more and more popular when the media began focusing on the *banlieues chaudes*, areas of the city with overpopulated housing projects known as HLMs (*habitation à loyer modéré*) with high immigrant populations,

where gangs, drugs, and crime are a part of everyday life. Rife with impoverished immigrants these marginalized people living in the *banlieues chaudes* were described as having their own culture and language (Méla 1997:16).

Covert Prestige

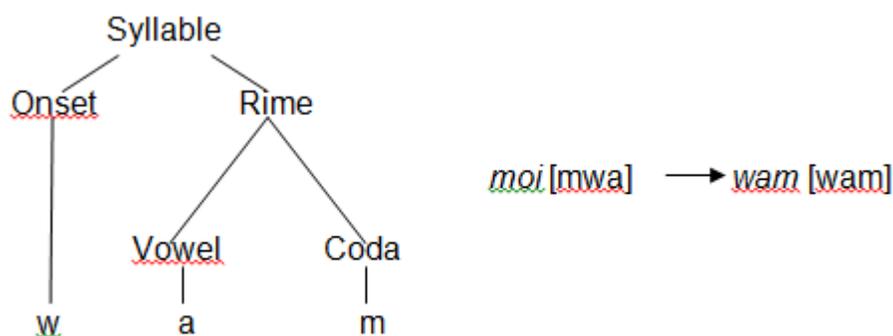
Although generally disdained by the professional and elite classes, the ability to speak *verlan* has come to reflect cultural sensitivity, initiation, and awareness of the working class (Lefkowitz 1989:313). Identifying linguistically with the working class creates the impression of solidarity with the working class, and an underlying understanding and acknowledgement of social problems and social trends (Lefkowitz 1989:319). Some French youth have utilized the language of the *banlieue* as an “antiracist practice that reflected an effort to establish a new ‘non-racial’ ethnicity” (Cutler 2007:528). However, adoption of *verlan* by the non-initiated necessitates the need for *verlanists* to continually find creative ways to keep their language codified. Important to note, however, is that not all are eager to embrace *verlan*. Amongst the upper class, the professionals, and the intellectuals, there are many who do not advocate the usage of *verlan* nor do they wish to associate themselves with the working class (Sloutsky 2008:315).

The Verlanization Process

As in the case of any other process, *verlan* requires rules such as formation, interpretation, and how and when to use *verlan*. If one does not understand the rules of a game, one risks being excluded from that game. Of importance to note is that one never *verlanizes* every word in a sentence (Méla 1997:30). In fact, the general rule is that *verlan* does not replace every word in a sentence and is never used to replace more than 50% of a sentence (Bachmann and Basier 1984:175). With respect to rap

and hip-hop lyrics, it is unusual to see more than ten to twenty percent of a phrase coded in verlan.

First of all, it is important to understand that verlan favors monosyllabic and disyllabic words. In the case of a monosyllabic word in verlan, phonologically it consists of an onset, a rime, and a coda. Personal pronouns, especially the first and second person singular are often verlanized. With respect to the first person singular pronoun, *moi* [mwa] is verlanized to *oim* [wam]. The second person singular pronoun, undergoing the same process is turned from its normative referential French form, *toi* [twa] to its verlanized form, *oit* [wat].

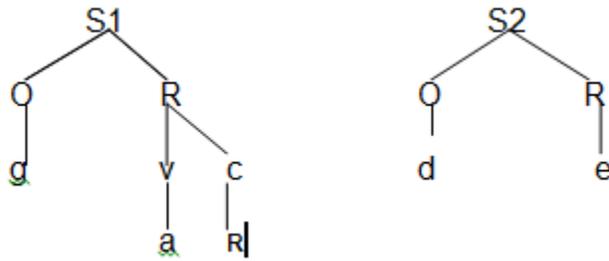


For monosyllabic words terminating in a vowel, after resyllabification, the word terminates with a consonant (CV) → VC. The following examples are taken from the Sexion d'Assaut corpus.

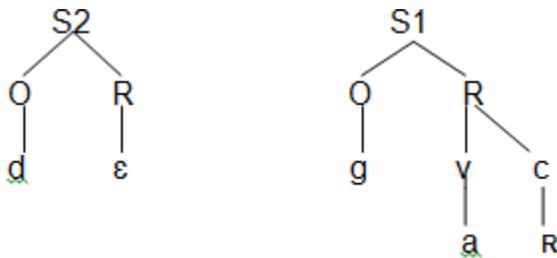
- a. pas [pa] → ap [ap]
- b. moi [mwa] → oim [wam]
- c. mater [mate] → téma [tema]

Disyllabic words such as the verb *garder* [garde] 'to keep' undergo permutation enabling the creation of verlanized words by the simple inversion of syllables. For

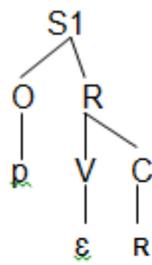
example, the word *garder* would first be divided into two syllables; 'gar' and 'de' respectively (Méla 1991:76).



When inverting S1 with S2 we obtain the verlanized form of the word *garder* or *dégar* [degar].



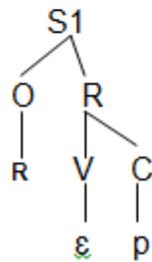
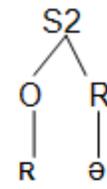
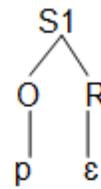
Thus, (S1 S2) S2 → S1 (Méla 1991:76). It would appear that dividing a word into two syllables is a simple task, however, syllable division in verlan doesn't necessarily follow the rules for the syllabification of normative referential French words. The schwa as a position final vowel in normative referential French is unstable, allowing the speaker to choose whether or not to pronounce it thus allowing for multiple variations of the same word in verlan. In fact, all consonants including the liquids R and l in final position can be followed by an epenthetic schwa. The word *père* [pɛʀ] in French translates to 'father' in English and both its resyllabified and verlanized form is examined in the following schematic.



Resyllabification



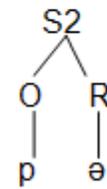
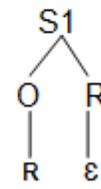
(pɛR or pɛRə)



Verlanization



(Rɛp or Rəp/Rəpə)



Therefore, in the example before resyllabification, the verlanized form of *père* would be *rep* [Rɛp] whereas after undergoing resyllabification, the results yield *repe* [Rəp] or [Rəpə] depending on personal preference. It is even possible to verlanize short phrases composed of two monosyllabic words which imitate the division of a disyllabic word.

Méla (1991:78) offers the following examples of short, verlanized phrases.

- a. comme ça → [sakɔm]
- b. par terre → [tɛRpaR]
- c. vas-y → [ziva]
- d. fais voir → [vwaRfɛ]

Trisyllabic words pose the greatest challenge in verlan as there are several ways that they can be verlanized. The first option is to divide the word into three syllables and simply invert them (S1 S2 S3) → (S3 S2 S1) (Méla 1991:81). Following this type of verlanization, the trisyllabic French word *possible* [pɔsiblə] would undergo the following permutation:

pɔ si blə → blœ si po
 S1 S2 S3 → S3 S2 S1

Another way to obtain verlanization of a trisyllabic word is by dividing the the word into two parts which renders the verlanization of the word unstable as it is up to the speaker to decide where to divide the word. Using this method of verlanization we could obtain any of the following variants of the word *possible*. This example is designed to illustrate the many ways in which the word *possible* may be verlanized but is certainly not all inclusive.

- a. possible → [po siblə] → siblepo [siblœ po]
- b. possible → [pos iblə] → ibleposs [ilbœ pos]
- c. possible → [posi blə] → blepossi [blœ posi]
- d. possible → [possib lə] → lepossib [lə possib]

Although following the rules of the verlanization process by dividing a trisyllabic word into two parts, the last example would not be a choice that most speakers would make due to its close approximation of the original word form. Yet another solution to the trisyllabic word dilemma is the truncation of longer word forms to shorter word forms. Often this allows the verlanist to verlanize formerly trisyllabic words as though they are monosyllabic or disyllabic words. Although verlanists generally adhere to and apply rules to the verlanization process, the most important thing for the verlanist is the sound of the verlanized word. “There is a music to it, it has to sound good so that it stays in your head” (Bachmann and Basier 1984:176). In general, the verlanized word form that sounds the best will be the variant that is most readily adopted into the lexicon.

Reverlanization

Because of its semi-acceptance into the lexicon of standard French, verlan has a tendency to lose its cryptic significance once adopted by the masses. When a

verlanized word is adopted by the non-initiated, the initiated reverlanize the word, thus retaining its original encrypted value. The reverlanization of a word once again renders that word nearly incomprehensible to the non-initiated. For example, the term *keur* is the verlanized form of the word *arabe*. Originally a derogatory word, *keur* is now assimilated into everyday French and now simply refers to a French person of Arab descent living in France. In order to protect its cryptic nature, *keur* has been reverlanized as *reube* or *reub*. Another interesting example is the verlanization and reverlanization of the monosyllabic French argotic word, *flic* [flik], which translates as *cop* in American English.

[flik] → [flikə] → [kœfli] → [kœf] = keuf

Reverlanized form:

[kœf] → [kœfə] → [fœkø] → [fœk] = feuk

It is worth noting that the pronunciation of the reverlanized French word *flic* parallels the pronunciation of the American English word 'fuck'. Aside from its cryptic properties, verlan can also be utilized to create humorous links to other well-known languages like American English. Although I have not seen any evidence to either confirm or deny the fact that *flic* was reverlanized to render its phonetic properties closer to the American English word, *fuck*, the parallel remains both uncanny and humorous.

Sexion d'Assaut's 25 Most Verlanized Words

In order to remain consistent throughout my thesis, I chose to work with the Sexion d'Assaut corpus to identify the 25 most commonly used verlanized words from their album, *L'école des points vitaux*. The results are found in Table 5-1. Where gender

can be identified by the presence of the nouns within the context of the lyrics, I have included the gender markers, (f) indicating a feminine noun and the masculine marker, (m) to indicate the presence of a masculine noun. I have also included the phonetic transcription of the words next to the verlanized word. All words were confirmed by the use of the website www.dictionnairedelazone.fr. The propensity to verlanize monosyllabic and disyllabic words far outweigh the verlanization of trisyllabic words. With respect to monosyllabic words, 8 (32%) of the 25 most common verlanized words in this table are monosyllabic. In the case of disyllabic and trisyllabic words, the table demonstrates first and foremost the importance of syllabic inversion, the most important factor to consider when verlanizing a word. In the process of syllable inversion, words are often truncated to accommodate the need for encryption as well as increase the speed at which one can speak. Therefore, the oral reorganization of the inverted word is extremely important when considering the verlanization of a word because if a word cannot be pronounced, it will be abandoned. Finally, orthographic choice follows the oral reorganization of the verlanized word and in many cases a disyllabic or trisyllabic verlanized word is hyphenated although the hyphen has no bearing on pronunciation. In the example of the disyllabic French word *quartier*, the word *tiek* has been verlanized and truncated in the following manner:

quartier [kɑʁ tje] → [tje kɑʁ] → [tje k(aʁ)] → [tjɛk] = tiek

16 of the 25 most common verlanized words in Sexion d'Assaut's *L'école des points vitaux* are disyllabic (64%) reinforcing the notion that verlan favors disyllabism. The noun, New York, is the only example of a trisyllabic word in the table. However it is important to recognize that *New York* is a disyllabic word that has been converted to a

trissyllabic word post-verlanization. In this case, the choice has been made by the author/speaker to add an epenthetic schwa to the end of the word following the /k/ in New York allowing for the following permutation:

New York [nujɔrk] → [nujɔrkə] → [kœnujɔR]
(S1 S2) → (S1 S2 S3) → (S3 S1 S2)

New York is also the only case of a borrowed word from another language, in this case, American English.

Verlan is a linguistic phenomenon that has both social and linguistic implications for its speakers as well as for those who do not understand it. At its most basic level, verlan reveals the fundamental societal need for individuals to both belong to a particular group as well as forging a group identity that distinguishes that group and the individuals in that group from other groups. Verlan also serves to exclude the non-initiated by rejecting a language and a culture in which the speakers of verlan have traditionally been marginalized and have become disenfranchised. In essence, verlan is a linguistic process designed to exclude the non-initiated from the initiated.

Table 5-1. The 25 most common words in verlan from Sexion d'Assaut's *L'école des points vitaux*

Word	Original Form	Language of Origin	Occurrences
meuf (f) [mœf]	femme	French	10
Ap [ap]	pas	French	9
té-ma [tema]	mater	French	8
al [al]	là	French	6
oim [wam]	moi	French	4
mif (f) [mif]	famille	French	4
tiek, [tjɛk] tié-quar or tier-car (m) [tjɛkar]	quartier	French	4
tits-pe [tispø]	petits	French	3
ien-b [jɛbø]	bien	French	3
ieps [iɛps]	pieds	French	2
vésqui [veski]	esquive	French	2
oid [wad]	doigt	French	2
bolos [bɔlɔs]	lobotomisé	French	2
tro-mé [trɔme]	metro	French	2
teau-cou [toku]	couteau	French	2
tebé [tøbe]	bête	French	2
squette-ca [skɛtka]	casquette	French	1
fle-gi [flœzi]	giffle	French	1
sage-vi [zaʒvi]	visage	French	1
ke-newyork [kənujɔrk]	New York	American English	1
ti-sor [tisɔR]	sorti	French	1
pe-pon [pəpoŋ]	pompe	French	1
jet-pro [ʒɛpro]	projet	French	1
sé-po [zɛpo]	posé	French	1
oi-b [wab]	boisson	French	1

CHAPTER 6 BORROWING

Word borrowing is a cross cultural phenomenon whereby one language borrows words or phrases from another language. Word borrowing cannot take place unless two cultures and their respective languages somehow manage to come into contact with each other. Haugen (1950:81-3) defines borrowing as “the attempted reproduction in one language of patterns previously found in another.” For our purposes, we will examine the influence of American English and Arabic on French hip-hop and rap. As American English has come to dominate the world linguistically as the language of politics, technology, science, and entertainment, it has become a language of prestige in many countries. Hebblethwaite (2007:9) adds that “Among borrowings, loanwords import morphemes and meaning with relative (low, partial or total) phonological integration”. Although French hip-hop and rap artists borrow words from American English, they place the words in the same word order in which that we would find them in normative referential French. Because hip-hop and rap originated in the United States of America, it is not surprising that word borrowing occurs in French hip-hop and rap. However, some might find the frequency of American English utterances that occur in the repertoire of French hip-hop and rap artists surprising. Although American English is currently the dominant linguistic force contributing to the new words infiltrating the French lexicon, it should be noted that within the history of the French language linguistic changes and choices have occurred over the centuries to shape standard French into the normative referential variety currently taught worldwide in scholastic settings. Cutler (2007:525) notes that as general rule, “European rappers tend to use their mother tongue” and that as for “bilingual second and third generation migrants and

rappers, they tend to use the dominant language of the society that they live in”.

Although this may have been true initially, if rappers can rap in a language that will allow them to achieve greater album sales, they will generally rap in that language and then borrow words from other languages such as American English, Arabic or their native tongue.

Paris as the Linguistic Melting Pot

For centuries, Paris has been representative of a type of linguistic melting pot. With the industrialization of France during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, mass emigration ensued from rural settings and small villages to the city where the promise of work loomed larger than life. Villagers emigrating from the French countryside to Paris brought with them their own brand of local and regional dialects, and when settling in Paris, generally tended to settle where there were others who spoke the same variety of French that they did. With respect to Parisian immigration, Higa suggests that one of the reasons that Parisian immigrants tended to cluster linguistically was the new immigrants' need to find their place in society, their need to belong in the new environment, and that their need for a dialect was “obviously coupled with their desire to show the progress of their acculturation” (Higa 1973:80). In the 20th century, France fought two major wars on their soil: World War I and World War II in which the French were exposed to American culture and American English first-hand on a massive scale. In the latter half of the 20th century, in 1962 France saw the return of the *pieds-noirs*, expatriates and their children who had formerly lived in Algeria during France's period of colonization before the Algerian war (Sloutsky 2008:311). Although the former French colonists from Algeria and their children spoke French, it was marked by a slight Arabic accent and was peppered with words coming from other languages

and dialects. During the 1960s and 1970s, waves of immigrants from former French colonies, especially the Maghreb (Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia) and West Africa, began to arrive in France (Sloutsky 2008:311). It was at this time that the proliferation of ethnic words began to encroach upon the normative referential variety of French (Sloutsky 2008:311), with Arabic exerting the most linguistic influence on the French language during this period of time. Although Arabic continued to be a contributing factor to contemporary French, during the 1980s and 1990s it was the internet that helped to push American culture and American English to the forefront. By using the internet, the French suddenly had access to news and information on a worldwide scale.

Popular Culture

The American culture has not only come to be embraced and accepted, but emulated by many French youth. The French youth have been quick to adopt the fashions that American youth wear such as jeans, t-shirts, high tops, basketball caps, skateboarder attire, and of course attire associated with hip-hop and rap. American music has been at the forefront of the global music scene since the latter half of the 20th century, offering the world such genres as jazz, blues, gospel, rock, rhythm and blues, pop, rap, and hip-hop. With respect to entertainment, American films are now readily available for French youth to watch in movie theaters in their original versions, meaning that the films are not dubbed into French but are often subtitled. Through personal observations while in France, I observed that American television series such as *Desperate Housewives* and *House* are viewed regularly in French households and are currently among the most popular in France, lending to the myth of every American enjoying an affluent lifestyle and living in neighborhoods that look like Wisteria Lane in

Desperate Housewives. Whereas previous generations had less access to American films or music, thanks to the internet it is now available by the simple click of a mouse. American English has been utilized by the French media, including television, radio, and newspapers further augmenting the prestige of American English in France. Based on a search for all occurrences of new lexical borrowings in a corpus based on newspaper sources in 2010, Chesley (2010:231) determined that:

new Anglicisms outnumber all other new borrowings combined. When cross-checking these results against the online archives of another French newspaper, it is found that the Anglicisms are more productive than borrowings with similar frequencies from other languages. Additionally, qualitative findings show that new Anglicisms are more likely than other borrowings to be integrated into the French lexicon.

Chesley utilizes information based on newspaper sources, and one has to wonder if the same tendency is true within the *banlieue* setting. With a predominately Arab influence, it would not be surprising if Arabic borrowings were greater than American English borrowings within the *banlieue*. Because the oral form of a language changes more rapidly than its written form, one has to wonder if Arabic will be the next great influence on the French language, eventually displacing American English.

English is widely studied in France, and the distinction between British and American English is often made, the British English enjoying more prestige in academic settings while the American English variety enjoys greater prestige in the business arena, especially in certain fields (computer science, electronics, mass entertainment, sports, life styles, etc.) (Thogmartin 1984:448). Often at the forefront of technology, American words such as *e-mail* and *click* have made their way into the French lexicon. The reason for this is that the French have been slow to create new words in French to

replace the American English intruders. Thus the words *e-mèl*, *mail*, and the verb *clicker* have made their way into everyday French vocabulary although in the case of e-mail, a French alternative exists, the word *courriel*.

Toubon's Ruling

However, not all French embrace American culture or American English. In fact, in 1994 Jacques Toubon introduced a law outlawing anglicisms which has been relatively ineffective. Toubon's law has not been successful on several fronts because the law is not enforceable and the French are slow to come up with French equivalents for words. On the occasions that French words have become available, the French in general seem to prefer the American English versions. For example, the word *hamburger* was deemed unacceptable under the Toubon ruling and although the recommended alternative, *steak haché*, was introduced into the French language, *hamburger* remained the most popular, and *steak haché* has all but disappeared from the language. The word *cheeseburger* was also banned under Toubon's ruling, even though no alternative in French was offered. Although Toubon's ruling did have support from certain parts of the public, one can walk into a McDonald's today and order a McChicken, a hamburger, or even a Cheeseburger Royale (Grigg 1997:378). According to Article 28 (2) bis of Toubon's Rule (www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Toubon_Law.), at least 40% of the music played on the radio in France must be Article 28 (2)bis:

The substantial proportion of musical works in the French language or performed in a regional language being used in France, which has to reach a minimum of 40 percent of French-language songs, with half of which at least coming from new talents or new productions, broadcast during significant listening times by all radio broadcasting services licensed by the Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel, for the share of its programs comprising musical entertainment.

However, faced with some difficulties in implementation, the legislators decided to introduce greater flexibility to the 40 percent quota system. The regulatory authority (the *Conseil supérieur de l'audiovisuel*) has some discretion to apply the quotas and to offer a different solution to certain specialized radio stations. Toubon's quota has been partially responsible for the rapid augmentation in popularity of French hip-hop and rap.

Social Prestige and Authenticity

Aside from the obvious linguistic dominance that American English enjoys worldwide, social prestige and linguistic authenticity become important players in French hip-hop and rap for two reasons. First and foremost, the United States of America is the birthplace of rap and hip-hop and according to Higa (1973:80), "People who want to exhibit their familiarity with foreign cultures, especially so-called prestigious cultures, tend to use foreign words as proud evidence of such familiarity. In utilizing American English vocabulary, French rappers are acknowledging the genre's birthplace as well as displaying a certain sense of irreverence toward the French language. In choosing to utilize American English words, the rappers are in a sense rejecting the French language and opting for the social prestige and authenticity that a few American English words inserted into their lyrics can provide. Herbert Pilch (1976:152) even suggests that:

a modest amount of knowledge of the prestige language is ... socially considered a hallmark of higher education. Interspersing one's discourse with bits and pieces from the prestige language is taken to bespeak an admirably progressive attitude in all walks of life.... Typically, it is believed that this sesquilingual discourse is due to the absence of suitable terms in the inferior language. The terms exist, of course (or may be coined at will), but they do not sound distinguished enough.

Authenticity, or 'street cred', is important in establishing a rapper's reputation because the fan base wants to believe that a rapper comes from an authentic, but not

necessarily the same, background as they do. In theory, the rapper would represent the thoughts, feelings, attitudes and experiences of the fan through his or her lyrics.

Therefore, by emulating the fashion, attitudes, philosophy, and linguistic proclivity of American rappers, French rappers are establishing an identity that not only ties them to their fan base, but acknowledges rap and hip-hop's roots in another country.

It is important to note, however, that a French rapper's linguistic repertoire is greater than an American rapper's linguistic repertoire as American rappers generally rap in American English and will from time to time pepper their flow with an occasional Spanish word whereas French rappers utilize borrowing from several languages, verlan, and argot quite readily. For example, from the Sexion d'Assaut corpus, the top 25 borrowed words from the album, *L'école des points vitaux*, in Table 6-1 demonstrate borrowing from four languages: English, Arabic, Malien (Bambara), and Italian in addition to the primary language of expression, French. Other languages such as Romani, Vietnamese, and other African dialects are not uncommon within the UF 2011 Hip-Hop Corpus.

It should be noted that Sexion d'Assaut is not representative of a typical rap group due to the large number of rappers that comprise the group. Therefore, the greater the number of individuals associated with a given project, the greater the number of potential linguistic influences. Table 6-1 also illustrates the 25 most borrowed words on the album, *L'école des points vitaux*, the language of origin, the English translation, how many occurrences for this particular album, and the source (if any) consulted to make the translation. Table 6-2 takes into account the origin of the 25 most borrowed words from Sexion d'Assaut's *L'école des points vitaux*. From this album, 16 (64%) are of

English origin with a total of 113 (55.66%) occurrences out of the total 203 incidences of the most borrowed words. It is also interesting to note that the most recurrent borrowed word is *love* at 33.6%. The next most significant borrowing comes from Arabic with 6 (24%) occurrences out of the 25 and 51 (25%) of the 203 incidences of borrowing. In addition to English and Arabic, an African language is also represented by the appearance of two Bambara words from Mali which although only represent 8% of the borrowed words, accounts for 17%, or 35 instances out of the 203 of the top 25 most borrowed words. Taking into account the fact that only two words produce 35 occurrences indicates that they are significant. The final language that appears on the album is Italian, yielding only one word at four occurrences or only approximately 2% of the 203 borrowed words.

Word and phrase borrowing are an almost unavoidable linguistic phenomenon in today's digital age; however, linguistic borrowing into the French language has been going on for centuries. Although there will always be participants in a given linguistic community that resist and even try to stop linguistic change and borrowing, any time that two cultures with their own languages come into contact, the potential for word and phrase borrowing exists. When one language enjoys a dominant social status, as is the case with American English in France, the temptation and tendency to borrow from that language is even greater. Language is not a static entity, language is ever changing and evolving, and attempting to deny, or even halt borrowing is almost impossible, especially given the technological and digital age of the 21st century and the role of American English within that system.

Table 6-1. The 25 most borrowed words from Sexion d'Assaut's *L'école des points vitaux*.

Word	Language of origin	Meaning	Occurrences	Source
love [luv]	English	Love	38	
wati [wati]	Malien (Bambara)	Waatibé can mean either all of the time of without limits	31	www.wikipedia.org/wiki/Wati_B
akhi [ari]	Arabic	My brother	23	Mustapha Sami
bled [blɛd]	Arabic	Country of birth	8	www.dictionnairedelazone.fr/
black [blæk]	English	Black; designates the African race	8	
OK [oke]	English	OK	7	
kick [kɪk]	English	To kick	6	
cool [kul]	English	Mellow, OK	6	
job [dʒɔb]	English	job	6	
night [naɪt]	English	night	6	
fuck [fʌk]	English	To have sex with someone; also used as an expletive	5	
flash [flæʃ]	English	Love at first sight	5	www.dictionnairedelazone.fr/
beef [bif]	English	un argument	5	
shit [ʃɪt]	English	Drugs; also used as an expletive	5	
ghetto [ɡeto]	Italian	A disadvantaged neighborhood	4	fr.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ghetto
flipper [flipe]	English	To flip out	4	www.dictionnairedelazone.fr/
belek [belɛk]	Arabic	Pay attention or to watch out	4	www.dictionnairedelazone.fr/
go [go]	Malien (Bambara)	A girl or female	4	www.dictionnairedelazone.fr/
seume [sɔm]	Arabic	Hate	4	www.dictionnairedelazone.fr/
flow [flo]	English	To rap in a fluid style	4	
flop [flap]	English	A failure	4	
khey [re]	Arabic	Brother	4	Mustapha Sami

Table 6-1. Continued

Word	Language of origin	Meaning	Occurrences	Source
pro [pʁo]	English	Professional	4	
back [bæk]	English		4	
dealer [dilœʁ]	English	Drug dealer	4	www.dictionnairedelazone.fr/
		Total:	203	

Table 6-2. Percentage breakdown of the 25 most borrowed words from Sexion d'Assaut's *L'école des points vitaux*.

Language of origin	Total number of occurrences	Percentage of the 203 borrowings	Number of occurrences within the 25	Percentage of the 25 most borrowed words
English	113	55.7	16	64
Arabic	51	25.13	6	24
Bambaric	35	17.2	2	8
Italian	4	1.97	1	4
Total:	203	100.0	25	100

CHAPTER 7 CONCLUSION

Among young people in France, language games such as argot and verlan constitute an important mode of expression. Because of these popular word games, the French lexicon is constantly undergoing unpredictable changes at a rapid rate. In less than 20 years, the French media's attention to and discussion of the French spoken by urban youth has expanded to reveal four important dimensions in the usage of this variety of French: age, sex, ethnicity and the concept of the working class (Fagyal 2004: 45). Fagyal (2004:56) suggests that these linguistic innovations indicate solidarity within a specific linguistic and social group, and enables them to distinguish themselves from the larger linguistic community and the attainment of standardized referential French.

Although argot and verlan have existed for centuries within the French lexicon, the recent attention by the media has only served to highlight and accelerate its usage in social circles that would have never accepted its usage before. This is due mostly to the French media's coverage of suburban plight and the projects that have pushed verlan and argot to the forefront linguistically by proposing that these linguistic anomalies have become the basis for a new brand of French. According to Fagyal (2004:58), if it was not for the French media, "this type of word play wouldn't be considered a distinct variety of French and the suburban youth from working class families would continue to engage in these word games".

French rappers use the entire linguistic repertoire available to them including regional and social dialects as well as forms of word play such as argot, verlan, and extensive borrowing from American English and Arabic (Cutler 2007:526). Although the use of "linguistic practices associated with a given ethnic group may be sufficient for an

individual to pass as a group member” (Cutler 2007:527), it is important to note that just as in American rap, language authenticity is crucial to a rapper’s success. “Authenticity in the French rap scene is centered on the use of local or often stigmatized linguistic variations entwined with American English hip-hop and rap slang” (Cutler 2007:533). According to Cecelia Cutler (2007:523), the rap and hip-hop lexicon is constantly undergoing expansion as new words and expressions take the place of those words and expressions that fall out of use.

As music is often a reflection of what is happening within a given society, studying the effect of American English on contemporary French through hip-hop and rap has several important implications. First and foremost, it is becoming more and more apparent that American English as a whole is “encroaching on areas of life which once would have been conducted in French” (Grigg 1997:383). This is demonstrated by the recurrent usage of American English words not only in music but in advertising campaigns, newscasts, radio programs, movies, television programs, and in print. Secondly, the infiltration of American English words and expressions into the French lexicon over the last twenty years has intensified at a rapid rate due to instantaneous access to information through the use of the internet. Grigg (1997:383) insists that while the intrusion of American English into the French language has the potential to reduce the importance and relevance of the French language in certain spheres, “the latter is perhaps more serious in that it has the capacity to alter intrinsically the language’s vocabulary (if not yet its syntax and other areas of grammar), a major aspect defining any language”. However, any aspect of contact between two cultures with their own languages means that the potential for both linguistic change and exchange exists

through word and phrase borrowing. The dominant language accorded more prestige will ultimately exert a greater linguistic influence on the less prestigious language than the less prestigious language will exert upon the dominant language. Such is the case of American English influencing the French language in the first half of the 21st century.

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Kelly Wiechman (née Van Horn) was born in and grew up in the City of Orange, CA. She earned her B.A. degree in administrative studies from the University of California at Riverside in Riverside, California in 1990. After having successful a career with NIKE in California, she moved to Charleston, SC, in 1996 where she worked for DHL in international tracing and customer service and for UPS Supply Chain Solutions clearing shipments through Customs for Philips Electronics. In 2006 she left her full time employment to earn her degree in French and Secondary Education at the College of Charleston in Charleston, South Carolina. At the University of Florida, she taught both the first and second semesters of French at the beginning level for two years, and earned her M.A. in French and Francophone studies in 2012. Kelly is currently working as Dr. William Calin's Graduate Research Assistant while she pursues her Ph.D. in French and Francophone studies at the University of Florida.