Rap and Islam in France, Holland and Germany: the Arabic Islamic lexical field in French, Dutch and German Rap Lyrics

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Linguistics
French-Arabic (language contact & sociolinguistics)

Ethnomusicology (rap lyrics and rap culture)

Religion (Islam)
Muslims make up 7.5% of France, 5.5% of Holland, 5% of Germany (Rogers, Simon. 2011. *The Guardian*).

**France**: Algeria, Morocco, Tunisia, Comoros, Senegal, Lebanon, Syria, etc.

**Holland**: Morocco, Algeria, etc.

**Germany**: Turkey, Iran, Iraq (Kurdish), Morocco, etc.

Islam in Europe by percentage

source: [wikipedia.org](http://wikipedia.org)
Research projects on Arabic language and cultural contact in France, Holland and Germany

- Identify the Arabic lexical and thematic fields in French, Dutch, and German rap lyrics; Islamic lexical field.
- Compare the Arabic Islamic lexical field in rap texts with judgements from the general public.
- Explore the bilingual practices in mosques through Friday sermons, prayers, and language instruction.
The globalization of hip hop/
Hip hop as scaffolding for world cultures

- The hip hop genre was adapted in European languages in the 1980 and 1990s.
- France and Germany are the 2nd and 3rd biggest hip hop markets globally; Holland is in the top 10.
- 30-40 major label hip hop albums are released annually in France and Germany and 15-25 in Holland.
- Dozens more released independently.
- Muslims in the European rap scene have increased familiarity with Arabic Islamic words.
“Classic” literature versus Rap in units sold

Les 10 albums les plus vendus :

1. MANAU - Panique Celtique : 1 650 000
2. IAM - L'école du micro d'argent : 1 080 000
3. MC SOLAAR - Prose Combat : 880 000
4. DIAMS - Dans Ma Bulle : 860 000
5. NTM - Supreme Ntm : 805 000
6. MC SOLAAR - 5e As : 805 000
7. DOC GYNECO - 1ere Consultation : 730 000
8. SNIPER - Gravé dans la roche : 430 000
9. MC SOLAAR - Paradisiaque : 415 000
10. BENNY B - L'album: 415 000

From (www.2kmusic.com/fr)
Recent rap sales figures

- *Racine carée*, Stromae, 1.880.000
- *Subliminal* (2013), Maître Gims, 775.000
- *L’apogée* (2012), Sexion d’Assaut, 556 000
- *Les yeux plus gros que le monde* (2014), Black M, 240,000
- *Cosmopolitanie* (2014), Soprano, 150,000
- *Corleone* (2014), Lacrim, 80.000

Top-sellers make use of the Islamic lexical field

Source: [http://www.chartsinfrance.net/](http://www.chartsinfrance.net/)
The majority are males between 18 – 45 years of age. Generation 2.0 & 1.5. Rappers in my corpus are French/Dutch/German + Arabic bilinguals. Exceptions are Muslim rappers with Iranian, Turkish, Senegalese, Malian, even Guadeloupian heritage (Kery James), etc.

Several rappers are trilingual, for example Kurdo: German, Kurdish and Arabic.
The sociolinguistic context

• Standard versus non-standard language

Rap varieties:
• Vernacular French
• Urban French, Urban Young Style
• Straattaal “street language” (Nortier, p.c.)
• Argot (“slang”), verlan (“syllable-switching”)
• Kanakisch (“immigrant German”)

• Bilingual French-Arabic (code-switching & borrowing)

Multilingual tendencies:
• French/Dutch/German base + Arabic + English
  (add Turkish in Germany and Romani in France...).
The religious context

- Layperson Islam that blends religion with personal life-narratives or world-narratives.
- Sectarian affirmations are generally rare.
- Extremist religious ideology is not a focus in much rap culture (satirized in Germany by Alligatoah 2013).
- In France and Holland, most rappers are Sunni.
- Some Shi’a rappers work in Germany.
(1) France: Médine (Algerian parents)
Médine: 8 albums and one book since 2004

https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E7B45h_lAEk
Striking aspects of Médine’s text

• Criticism about the implementation of secularist ideology.
• Contradictions in discourse about Islam: Islam’s polygamy versus France’s debauchery (i.e. DSK, etc.).
• Secularist extremism: overemphasis on the personal signs of religion such as the beard, the veil or the niqab among Muslims or the cross of Jesus among Christians.
• Confronting stereotypes: *Islamo-caillera* (Islamo-thug), *nazislamistes*
• Selective attention of the secularists who focus on Islam and ignore Christian overreaches (*les affaires de crèches de Noël*, Dec. 2014).
• Sufficiency in Islam
• **Arabic Islamic borrowings**: Halal, Charia, Djellaba, *incha'Allah*, Allah, Aïd, fatwas, muezzin
(2) Holland: Salah Edin (Moroccan parents)
Salah Edin (2007)
Striking aspects of Salah Edin’s text

- Contradictions in Dutch discourse: Islam as oppressive to women versus Dutch society’s commodification of women in the prostitution trade.
- The exclusion of migrants and their children.
- Criticism of an obsession with resources, consumption and commerce.
- Problems with the stereotyping of Muslims.
- Skepticism about media’s truthfulness.
- Recollection of colonialism and its consequences abroad and in Europe.
(3) Germany: PA Sports (Iranian parents) & Alpa Gun (Turkish heritage)
Striking aspects of PA Sports’s and Alpa Gun’s text

- Representations of the fundamentals of Islam:
  - (1) Shahada
  - (2) 5 daily prayers
  - (3) a month of fasting in Ramadan
  - (4) Zakat (alms-giving)
  - (5) the Hajj (pilgrimage to Mecca)

- The inherent worthiness of God as motivation for prayer; rewards/punishment irrelevant

- Every line is linked to Islam

- A Shi’a-Sunni collabo track

- **Arabic Islamic borrowings:** dünya, audhubillah, abdest, fitna, ya allah ya kerim, schahada, ramadan, zekat, mekka
Conclusion: Rap and Signs of the Emergence of European Islam

- Lexical borrowing provides a window into understanding social, political, cultural and ideological influences in a society (Ngom 2000:160).
- Borrowings, like other linguistic variables, construct boundaries between classes and communities.
- Rap music, language and religion intersect and create meaning for people.
- Rap lyrics are an accelerant in the dissemination and acculturation of Arabic religious lexical borrowings.
- A sign of the arrival of European Islam and its myriad expressions.
- Rap epitomizes global cultural convergence.
Findings about Arabic-French language contact from fieldwork in Paris, 2014

• Participants with knowledge of French and Arabic (n 14) scored on average for 55 items: 4.10/5.0
• Participants with no knowledge of Arabic (n 59) scored: 3.13/5.0
• My fieldwork in France in June 2014 with 73 Parisians shows a continuum/cline of awareness among the 55 words and expressions tested. 30.9% of the Arabic Islamic words from French rap texts were widely recognized (4-5/5.0) by the non-Arabic speakers (n 59), 29.9% were relatively well known (3-4/5.0), and 40% were peripheral (2-3/5.0)
• Men and women showed no difference in their levels of awareness.
• Participants ($n = 50$) under 30 had higher awareness (3.21/5.00) of the 55 items than those older than 30 (2.69/5).
• Rap texts display a mixture of established Arabic borrowings and innovations (or nonce borrowings).
• Arabic-French bilinguals under the age of the 30 are the leading these changes.
• Rap music operates efficiently to diffuse the lexical field via the internet and compact discs.
The longevity of religious lexical fields

- The importance of the lexicon of religion
- Haitian Vodou’s African lexicon has been resilient in spite of slavery.

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The place of mosques in the diffusion of Arabic Islamic lexical field

- The Arabic Islamic lexical field has the greatest salience among all the lexical fields of Arabic.
- The Arabic Islamic lexical field, among others in Arabic, is also highly susceptible to diffusion because of the Arabic-French, Arabic-Dutch and Arabic-German language practices of imams.
- The *khoutba* delivered in French, Dutch or German (or English in the United States), is heavily influenced by Arabic borrowings, code-switches and citations.
- Many words and expressions come from spoken Arabic and citations from the Qur’an and the Hadith.
- Any Arabic word can be used in *khoutba* delivered in French, Dutch, German or English. Usually they are words that reflect core concepts and teachings in Islam.
- Given the bilingual practices in many European mosques, it seems that the Arabic Islamic lexical field has a predisposition to spread to art forms like rap.