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# *The Quadrilingual Vocabulary of French Rap*

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**Abstract**[1]
Rap lyrics are a hybrid of improvised speech and carefully written poetry. As such, they offer many contradictions when submitted to linguistic analysis. They present two kinds of language that are often seen as antithetical when developing a corpus to be studied. The words the rappers utter are neither pure verse nor prose but instead, an imitation of speech set to music. This simulation of verbal communication betrays a meta-linguistic tendency and manifests a willful desire for symbolic speech. It is from this angle that the linguist must approach hip-hop music. It is not only what is said, but also how what is said represents the person who says it. The purpose of this study is to analyze the vocabulary of French rap and to deduce its greater symbolic meaning. I will show how the words chosen by the lyricists reflect the hybridization of society through a complicated mixture of four different kinds of linguistic utterances: standard French, French slang, American slang and the various *langues de bled*.

***Pour le résumé en français, voir la fin de l'article***

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Rap lyrics are a complicated hybrid of improvised speech and carefully written poetry. This is because some rhymes are unrehearsed "freestyles," some are memorized before being recorded, and some are written down beforehand. As such, these lyrics offer many contradictions when submitted to linguistic analysis. They present two kinds of language that are often seen as antithetical when developing a *corpus* to be studied. The words the rappers utter are neither pure verse nor prose but instead, an imitation of speech set to music. This simulation of verbal communication betrays a meta-linguistic tendency and manifests a willful desire for symbolic speech. It is from this angle that the linguist must approach hip-hop music. It is not only the *content* of what is said that matters, but also how the *form* of what is said represents the person who

[1] The author would also like to thank Kirk Anderson and Soumia Chouaf for their continued help with this project.

says it. The purpose of this study is to analyze the vocabulary of French rap and to deduce its greater symbolic meaning. I will show how the words chosen by the lyricists reflect the hybridization of society through a complicated mixture of four different kinds of linguistic utterances.

**Previous linguistic work on French Rap**

There has been surprisingly little work dedicated solely the language of French hip-hop[2]. In his seminal book *La Culture Hip-Hop*, Bazin places enormous emphasis on *oralité* and the "retour du rôle primordial de la parole" (Bazin 1995, 224)[3]. Béthune adds to this perspective with a supplementary emphasis on the "fusion des genres" (Béthune 1999, 37) of the written and the spoken word. Caffari and Villette refer to the language of French rap as a *bricolage* and as a

> langue versatile qui amalgame dans un continuel jeu sur les signifiants, des acronymes, des aphorismes, des sigles, des onomatopées (2000, 101)[4].

Hassa (2010) attempts to divide this amalgam into its constituent parts of French, Verlan, English, and Arabic. For her, the language of French hip-hop is a clear manifestation of code switching between the three. Like Hassa, my study is data driven and seeks to analyze the individual parts of a highly hybridized language. However, my conclusions and methods are significantly different. Rather than looking for code switching between three different tongues, I present a study of the word selection process from four different linguistic sources.

**Quadrilingual**

The inspiration for this project derives from the song "La Téci" performed by the Parisian hip-hop group, Afro Jazz. Though it is not a particularly well-known track, it provides a critical meta-linguistic observation that will serve as a guide through the complicated vocabulary of French rap:

[2] It is customary for any article treating French rap to include a short history of the movement. For that reason I do not find it necessary to do so here. Consult Bazin for the most comprehensive history of hip-hop culture in France.
[3] "the return of the primordial role of speech" (Bazin 1995, 224). This and all translations by the author.
[4] "versatile language that amalgamates signifiers, acronyms, aphorisms, abbreviations and onomatopoeias in a continual game" (Caffari and Villette 2000, 101).

> Bang ! Encore une porte de hall qui se déglingue
> Les ados qui jouent les dingues
> La cave qui schlingue
> La majorité des jeunes ici sont des trilingues
> Français, Langue du Bled, Argot ou slang (Afro Jazz, "La Téci")[5].

On its surface, this is a typical rap verse that describes the chaos and poor living conditions of the rapper and the population that he represents. With the final two lines, it takes on a new dimension. The rapper, Daddy Jockno, overtly states his desire to represent the language of the youth in the *cités* and thereby manifests a clear consciousness of the meta-linguistic nature of hip-hop.

For Daddy Jockno, the French that the youth speak is not one singular language, but a composite of three different tongues. However, there is a contradiction in his assertion that the youth of the *banlieue* are trilingual. The problem is that he refers to "argot *ou* slang" as though these two words have the same meaning. In using the English word for slang to modify the French equivalent of "argot" he alludes to the fact that English is a fourth language found in the lexicon of French rap. The *majorité des jeunes* have blended all of these tongues into a singular hybrid language with a quadrilingual vocabulary. The analysis of this mixture will be the guiding force behind this study into the parlance of French hip-hop of the late 1990s.

Before going into a broader study, it is first useful to consider this single verse in greater depth in order to first test my quadrilingual hypothesis. Evidently, there is plenty of *français*. There is not much *langue du bled* except for the word *bled* itself which originates from an Arabic word (*balad*) for country or village. L'*argot* is well represented with words like *schlingue* and *déglingue*. The presence of American *slang* is equally marked through the usage of *bang*, *hall*, and *slang* itself. As though he was trying to prove the point himself with these five lines, Daddy Jockno illustrates the true quadrilingual nature of *le rap français*.

[5] "Bang! Another door in the hall that busts open
Teenagers that play like fools
The stinky cellar
The majority of the youth here are trilingual
French, Language of the homeland, slang or *slang*" (Afro Jazz, "La Téci").



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## Choosing the Works

In order to broaden the study it is necessary to go beyond this one verse and to choose a wider assortment of songs. With such a great number of French rap groups the task of selecting a corpus to dissect is quite daunting[6]. Given the fluid nature of slang it is first necessary to determine a point in time to study. Certainly, the language that is used today is not the same that was used five, ten or twenty years ago. For this analysis I have chosen to focus exclusively on the years from 1997 to 1999.

Having chosen the timeframe it is then necessary to choose the musical groups. Again, the sheer number of possibilities is overwhelming. An exhaustive study of the vocabulary of *all* the active French hip-hop groups during the late 1990s would necessitate an entire book and exceeds the purview of this article. I have attempted to analyze the linguistic richness of this period through a representative assortment of four different groups that manifest the diversity of the rap movement at that particular time.

To have a diverse assemblage of French rappers one must account for the two broad divisions that exist in French rap. The first of which is geographic. Since its earliest days, the two largest concentrations of hip-hop creators were in Paris and Marseille[7]. There is also a stylistic separation between rap that is considered *hard* and that which is considered *jazzy* or *soft*. It was then logical for the purposes of this analysis to choose contemporary albums from *hard* and *softer* groups from these two poles of French rap. Suprême NTM and Afro Jazz represent Paris while Freeman and the Fonky Family represent Marseille. They are all of different levels of softness with Freeman being the softest and Afro Jazz being the hardest (with NTM and Fonky Family close behind). From these four groups I will divide the hybrid language into its constituent quadrilingual parts and draw conclusions from my observations at the end. All of the 72 songs in the corpus have undergone an exhaustive lyrical analysis in order to identify the nature of every single word. I have included the complete data set in the appendix located at end of this article and I will integrate sections of it into the essay as needed.

## Le Français

Taking my cue from the Daddy Jockno verse that inspired this study, I will begin my analysis of the quadripartite language with *le français*. It is

[6] It is interesting to note that in her own data driven linguistic study on French rap, Hassa addresses the same problem of selecting a corpus. She uses the "Victoires de la Musique" nominees as a criterion for selection and analyzes the lyrics of four different albums.

[7] For more on this division consult Bazin's excellent book on the early history of French rap.

important to emphasize that France distinguished itself early as a pioneer in non-English rap. In the days of the *old school*, most rappers outside of America would rap exclusively in English. Dee Nasty, an early pioneer of the Parisian rap scene explains that:

> Rappeurs, danseurs, et graffiteurs sont organisés à la chapelle pour 5F l'entrée. Petit à petit certains se mettent à penser qu'on pourrait faire du rap en français (Bocquet et Pierre-Adolphe 1997, 29)[8].

With the eventual release of "Change the Beat" by Beside, French rap continued its transformation toward rap *in* French[9]. In the excellent first person history of the movement, *Rap ta France*, the rapper Jhonygo hints that this evolution was almost obvious: "Pour moi, c'était évident de rapper en français, je parle français" (quoted in Bocquet and Pierre-Adolph 1997, 44)[10]. This nascent evolution was strongly reinforced by American Hip-hop legend Afrika Bambaata who urged his audience to rap in French during his 1988 tour of France:

> If you rap, rap in French, African, Arabian, West Indian and mix with English. We need more French rap and funk records (quoted in Bazin 1995, 96).

The *rappeurs* listened and French quickly became the second language of global hip-hop. This rise to prominence was greatly aided by the 1994 law that mandated every French radio station play a minimum of 40% French language music. The success of *le hip-hop* in both France and abroad is a contradictory source of national pride. It proves the beauty and persistence of the language while simultaneously being spoken by those whom France often treats as "less than French."

But what kind of *français* is spoken? If we strip away the other three linguistic elements of *langue du bled*, *argot* and *slang*, we find a somewhat

[8] "Rappers, dancers and graffiti artists organized themselves at *la chapelle* for a cover charge of five francs. Little by little some began to think that one could make rap in French" (Bocquet et Adolphe 1997, 29).
[9] It is one of the great ironies of French rap that the first song in French had an English title, was performed by a rapper with an English name and appeared on a record with an American rapper named Fab 5 Freddy.
[10] "For me it was obvious to rap in French, I speak French" (Bocquet et Adolphe 1997, 44).

paradoxical result. When one thinks rap one necessarily thinks of non-standard language and much of the *corpus* supports this presupposition. The data shows that in the 72 songs, there are 1445 separate utterances that could be considered non-standard (calculated as a combination of French slang, American slang, and words *du bled*). Yet, this must not be overstated as it only represents 4% of all words in the songs. Furthermore, standard, formal and overtly elegant language is to be found as well. I will illustrate this through two kinds of examples located throughout the corpus: the presence of *ne* in "ne…pas" negation and the frequent occurrences of the subjunctive mood.

***The persistence of "ne"***

In William Ashby's groundbreaking study on "The loss of the negative morpheme *ne* in Parisian French" he illustrates that the French use the first negative less and less[11]. This is especially true for the youth. In his conclusion he predicts: "The eventual loss of *ne* seems probable, given the historical records and the age distribution in the Paris Corpus" (Ashby 1976, 137). With rap being an art form of the young that is primarily a reproduction of spoken language, one would expect a complete absence of *ne*. Yet, an analysis of the data proves otherwise. The table below shows the relative abundance of "ne":

| *Group Usage* | *"ne…pas"* | *"pas" alone* | *Total Negations* | *% of "ne"* |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| Afro Jazz | 52 | 30 | 82 | 64% |
| Freeman | 38 | 87 | 125 | 30% |
| Fonky Family | 36 | 97 | 133 | 27% |
| NTM | 18 | 84 | 102 | 18% |
| Total | 144 | 298 | 442 | 33% |

**Figure 1: Presence of "ne"**

This table shows that in the entire corpus, the *ne* was used a surprising 33% of the time. It is even more striking to note that Afro Jazz, probably the most *argotique* group of the corpus, uses the *ne* with a 64% frequency rate. This hints that the language is more standard than one would think.

Going beyond the numbers there are some interesting examples that show paradoxical usage of the "ne…pas" construction. For example, in the

[11] I owe a particular debt to William Ashby as I began this project under his tutelage at the University of California, Santa Barbara.

song "Laisse pas traîner ton fils" by NTM there is a lack of consistency from one line to the next:

> Laisse pas traîner ton fils
> Si tu ne veux pas qu'il glisse
> Qu'il te ramène du vice
> Laisse pas traîner ton fils
> Si tu veux pas qu'il glisse (NTM, "Laisse pas traîner ton fils")[12].

While first line eschews the *ne*, the very next includes it. As if to further confuse things, the very same line is repeated later on without the *ne*. This is representative of the overall mixture of standard and non-standard *français* that abounds in the corpus.

***The subjunctive***

This NTM verse also contains an example of the subjunctive in French rap with the verb "glisser." In non-standard French there is a tendency to avoid the subjunctive through the usage of an infinitive, yet, the rappers in the corpus will often embrace the complicated mode. The table below outlines subjunctive usage for each group.

| *Group* | *Instances of the Subjunctive* |
|---|---|
| Afro Jazz | 9 |
| Freeman | 9 |
| Fonky Family | 13 |
| NTM | 15 |
| Total | 46 |

**Figure 2: Presence of Subjunctive**

An excellent example of an elegant subjunctive nestled with less *standard* elements of the quadrilingual vocabulary is found in an NTM song entitled "That's My People". Kool Shen says "J't'explique que c'que j'kiffe, c'est de fumer des spliffs, et puis de construire des riffs qui soient

[12] "Don't let your son run wild
If you don't want him to slip away
And that he'll come back filled with vices
Don't let your son run wild
If you don't want him to slip away" (NTM, "Laisse pas traîner ton fils").



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compétitifs"[13]. Within this one verse we first see two kinds of *langue du bled*: "kiffe," from Arabic for hashish, but here meaning "to like," and *spliff*, a word from the West Indies that is also referring to a conical cannabis cigarette. Within this ode to the chemical effects of THC there is an example of the subjunctive of *Être*. It is a usage so exquisite that it could be used in a language class[14]. Thus, Kool Shen's verse is at once a debased glorification of drug usage and a poetic demonstration of a difficult and often ignored grammatical mode.

### *Explaining the Standard*

Explaining the paradoxical presence of standard French in rap requires more thought about form than about content. First, it is a testament to the fact that the lyrics are a hybrid of writing and speech. The presence of more formal language could be the result of the added attention paid to the words when they are put to paper. A subjunctive easily omitted in a daily conversation may find itself impossible to resist when written. Furthermore, the unexpected formality could also be a question of meter and rhyme. With the capacity to alternate between formal and less formal speech, the rapper has more freedom to construct his verses. If an added *ne* helps to obtain the necessary amount of syllables in a line, it may also become impractical to deny.

Going beyond these technical considerations, the tendency to rap in a more standard register could also indicate a subconscious acceptance of the strongly held cultural belief that the French language is a beautiful object to be cherished and protected. This principle has lead to a strong national insistence on grammatical instruction at all levels of education. Perhaps the unlikely occasional usage of a more elegant French by the hip-hop artists is the fruit of such pedagogical emphasis. This strongly held belief in the power of language distinguishes the *rappeurs* from their American homologues, who have not been raised in a culture that profoundly values English[15]. Perhaps then, there is something nationalistic about the standard French that hides among the non-standard. Not only has hip-hop firmly placed France as the number two producer of one of the worlds most prominent art forms, it has done so while

[13] "My favorite thing is to smoke a spliff and to make riffs that are competitive" (NTM, "That's My People").

[14] I have successfully employed this very example in advanced grammar classes to illustrate the usage of the subjunctive for expressions of desire.

[15] This is not to imply that there are no segments of the population that cherish the English language. Most rappers in the United States grow up in areas where the education system is woefully insufficient and this is partly responsible for the largely "non-standard" English in Hip-Hop. Another major factor is the preponderance of Afro-American slang and grammar that serve to represent the rapper's socio-political background.

paying at least some respect to the tradition of language that characterizes the country that spawned it.

**La langue du bled**

Although the presence of standard language could indicate a certain pride in French, the general perception of those critical of *le hip-hop français* is quite to the contrary. Thanks to the other three "barbarous" elements that constitute the vocabulary of French rap — *langue du bled*, *argot* and *slang* — it continues to be seen as an abuse of the French language instead of one of its greatest triumphs. The first of those three "barbarous elements" to be discussed here is the *langue du bled*. This translates roughly to "language of the home country" and it belies the cosmopolitan nature of the art form. Although the word itself comes from Arabic, by no means is this vocabulary component merely Arabic[16]. Most often the *bled* language originates from North Africa, West Africa, or the Caribbean islands[17]. For a disadvantaged population that is often treated as being foreign, this usage of another tongue is both a social identifier and an indicator of cultural alienation. This underlines the fact that hip-hop often serves a kind of existential purpose. As Hughes Bazin wrote in his early book on French rap:

> Aussi bien pour les Afro-Américains que pour les groupes immigrés, français... [le rap] bat: sa force dans la destruction méthodique de l'histoire des peuples opprimés […]. Les expressions du hip-hop en ouvrant la parole ont ouvert un espace privilégiée pour déclarer cette revanche et tenter d'y trouver un écho (Bazin 1995, 27)[18].

This "opening of the word" is best understood through the analysis of the langue du bled.

Each group in this corpus contains at least one rapper with origins from a former French colony and they will integrate their native tongue with some

[16] For more on the usage of Arabic in French rap consult Hassa. She chooses to focus solely on this one *langue du bled* in her study and her findings are fascinating. Her scope is narrower but provides a more profound analysis of a singular foreign language in French hip-hop.

[17] These are certainly not the only *langues du bled*. There are also rappers from immigrant families who use languages as diverse as Colombian Spanish and Lebanese.

[18] "Much like it is for the African-Americans, rap fights for the immigrant groups in France: its force is in the methodical destruction of the history of oppressed peoples… The expressions of hip-hop, in opening the word, have opened a privileged space to declare this revenge and to try and find an echo there" (Bazin 1995, 17).

frequency. The figure below shows how many words from each *bled* are represented in the corpus.

| *Group* | *Arabic* | *Non-Arabic* | *Total* |
|---|---|---|---|
| Afro Jazz | 10 | 15 | 25 |
| Freeman | 35 | 5 | 40 |
| Fonky Family | 40 | 3 | 43 |
| NTM | 5 | 25 | 27 |
| Total | 90 | 45 | 135 |

**Figure 3: Instances of "langue du bled"**

It would be excessive to explain each usage represented above, but a few from several different countries will sufficiently illustrate the process in action.

First, it must be understood that there are two separate kinds of uses of the *langue du bled*: the universal and the specific. The first two examples that I have shown thus far *kiffer* and *bled* are illustration of the former. They both originate from Arabic, yet the rappers who use them are not of North African descent. This points to the fact that some words *du bled* exist without any clear national identification. For another example, neither NTM nor Afro Jazz posses any members from Senegal, but they both use the word *boug* (a reappropriated word from Wolof that is a pejorative appellation for African). Like *kiffer* and *bled*, it has become such an accepted term that it goes beyond any simple question of national origin. In essence, these words have become part of the universal hip-hop lexicon in French and they belie the art forms multilingual nature.

To transition from the universal to the specific, let us begin by considering another lyric by Afro Jazz:

> Expose sa philo sur la vie et la kaya
> Mais qu'est-ce qu'on attend pour foutre le faya (Afro Jazz, "Représente")[19].

In this brief rhyming couplet we have two words that belie the Antillean origin of the rapper, Daddy Jockno. The first example is *kaya*, which is another Jamaican term for marijuana. The second word, *faya* is surprisingly dynamic.

[19] "Exposing his philosophy on life and weed. But what are we waiting for to cause mayhem" (Afro Jazz, "Représente").

Employed by itself it is a Jamaican deformation of "fire." However, when used in the French idiomatic expression *foutre le faya* it refers to causing mayhem. Thus, the *mot du bled* from the West Indies has transformed into a kind of universal hip-hop *argot*. *Faya* is evidence of how the plurilinguistic tendency of French hip-hop evolves. What was once English gently transformed into a word specific to the Jamaican dialect, then altered its strict meaning when it became a colloquial expression in French.

Going beyond *kiffer* and *bled*, specific usage of Arabic logically depends on the familial origins of the members of the group. Given the higher percentage of Arabs living in Marseille than in Paris[20], it is not surprising to find a higher percentage of Arabic in Marseillais rap in the corpus. They used it 75 times while Parisian rappers used it only 15 times. I will not make too much of this particular regional distinction, as my intentionally limited corpus does not include any of the many Arabic rappers from Paris[21]. Nevertheless the higher population of rappers from North Africa in Marseille reflects the ethnic demographics of the city.

Few rappers embrace their North African origins as clearly as Freeman. His 1999 track *Bladi* was a commercial success and a high point in quadrilingual rap. Consider the following lines:

> Et certains comme moi écrivent, le bled, mon pays,
> Plus d'liberté d'expression,
> Y a Hassima Chaoul Matou Ali Anek y a Namoussiba,
> Seul une heure d'avion nous sépare (Freeman, "Bladi")[22].

Within the song there is no clear separation between the *langue du bled* and the French. Listeners unaccustomed to either language have a hard time

[20] According to the European Research Program (http://ec.europa.eu) the difference in population is quite striking. According to their figures, Marseille has 25% Muslim population while Paris has only 7.38%.

[21] It should also be noted that Hassa's study directly refutes my own conclusion. As she writes of her own corpus: "The degree to which Arabic is used varies among rappers, and this variation does not seem to occur along geographical lines" (Hassa 2010, 51).

[22] "And some people like me write about the homeland, my country
No more freedom of speech
Y a Hassima Chaoul Matou Ali Anek y a Namoussiba,
Only an hour plane ride separates us" (Freeman, "Bladi")
(I have done my best to provide the Arabic sentences in the Roman alphabet. Please excuse any mistakes.)

distinguishing one from the other. This linguistic melting is further reinforced by the rest of the song, which features the Rai legend Khaled singing in Arabic.

**Argot**

Following the order established by the citation from Daddy Jockno that guides this study, I will now turn my attention to *argot*. For the casual listener of French hip-hop, the usage of *argot* provides the biggest roadblock to comprehension. As in its American counterpart, French rap relies heavily on ever changing slang words and it often obfuscates the message of the song to the uninitiated. However, merely translating these words does little to elucidate the deeper truths that are found in the way that they are employed. It would be both laborious and pointless to provide a kind of glossary. Instead, I will approach this broad topic by analyzing two specific and meaningful phenomena: the rise of the word *niquer* and the regionalism of *argot*.

***Niquer***

In a 1996 article from *Le Monde* George Pierre already noted the increasing usage of *niquer*. He associated it with a new youth culture and correctly claimed that it signified a kind of revolt. Most importantly, he hinted at the role that rap music played in its emergence. In a sense, the word was needed for the art form to take root in France. Conversely, the word needed the art form for it to take its rightful place in the modern lexicon. The long and storied history of its English equivalent (*fuck*) exists wholly outside of any one particular artistic movement.

Much like the "f-word," *niquer* is capable of expressing rebellion and rage, two hallmarks of hip-hop expression. More importantly, the vulgar term has a directness that more proper French often lacks. *Niquer* replaced the soft, indirect and wordy "va te faire foutre." Perhaps these four words needed to be replaced by one in order to effectively express anger and hostility[23]. Hip-hop needs versatility, brutality and an economy of speech that less *argotique* French does not possess.

*Niquer* is found throughout the corpus. One need to go no further than the very name of the Paris' Suprême N.T.M. ("Nique ta mère") to see its importance[24]. The often-repeated slogan of Marseille's Fonky Family is the

[23] To be more specific, the usage of *niquer* is essentially an attempt to replicate the way in which *fuck* can take direct objects. The equivalence between Fuck the Police / Nique la Police would have been grammatically impossible with either "foutre" or "baiser".

[24] Their very name highlights the directness of *niquer*. I hardly think that a group that was named "VFTM" would have succeeded.

nihilistic "Nique tout!" This is accompanied by one of the most powerful enunciations by any French rapper "Nique la musique de France." The wide usage of *niquer* is a national and not a regional phenomenon. As it is in American rap, some groups are more vulgar than others, but it does not necessarily depend on the city. For example, Freeman used the word only twice while his Marseillais compatriots La Fonky Family used it an astounding 47 times.

***Regionalism***

Despite the universal embracing of *niquer*, much of French hip-hop argot is decidedly regional. This often serves as a linguistic indicator of the rivalry between Paris and Marseille. This division of speech is more pronounced than it is in America where the regional competition for marketplace dominance is rarely fought on the battlefield of vocabulary[25].

*Verlan*, the reversal of syllables in a word to create a new one, is the most widely publicized and discussed *argot*. Yet, despite the numerous articles and chapters dedicated to it, few have mentioned that it is primarily a Parisian dialect. For example, Vivienne Mela wrote an excellent article entitled "Verlan 2000" that successfully explained its usage, but she did not do any research outside of the Parisian suburbs. Only Hassa correctly observes in her own corpus that rap artists from Marseille "hardly use it" (Hassa 2010, 59).

There are exceptions to this unspoken rule. Much like there are universal *langue du bled* words that can be used by anyone regardless of origin, there is universal *verlan*. Most often these are single syllable reversals that have gained entry into the vocabulary of even the least disenfranchised youth. Examples of this kind include *meuf* for *femme* and *keuf* for *flic*. The figure below illustrates the usage of verlan for each group and region and gives evidence that it is mostly a Parisian phenomenon.

[25] Fortunately, this French rivalry is not as violent as its American counterpart. As Sat of the Fonky Family raps in the song "La Furie et la Foi":
"Paris à Marseille
Rien à voir avec les embrouilles bidon
New York, L.A."
("From Paris to Marseille
Nothing to do with the phoney beef between
New York, L.A.", Fonky Family, "La Furie et la Foi").



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| *Group* | *Instances of the Verlan* |
|---|---|
| Afro Jazz | 20 |
| NTM | 58 |
| Paris Total | 78 |
| | |
| Freeman | 0 |
| Fonky Family | 3 |
| Marseille Total | 3 |

**Figure 4: Instances of Verlan in Paris and Marseille**

The Parisian corpus is replete with verlan of varying complexity. The bisyllable form is the most common and Afro Jazz employs it in the song title *La Téci*. This is perhaps the simplest version of the codification in which Consonant **1** Vowel **1** Consonant **2** Vowel **2** ("Ci-té") is transformed into Consonant **2** Vowel **2** Consonant **1** Vowel **1** (Té-ci). Even in Parisian rap, it is relatively rare to find more complicated versions of verlan that include more syllables. An example of this refined *argot* can be seen in the following lyric from Kool Shen of NTM: "pas de soucis, non pas de tié-pi ici" ("Seine Saint-Denis Style"). In this example he has taken the three-syllable word "*pitié*" and transformed it into *tié-pi*.

Most linguistic critics are quick to state that *verlan* is a kind of code. It is a way for the content of one's speech to be masked by the form. This is understating the true complexity of this kind of *argot*. In fact, it is often a double code. First one must reverse the syllables, and then one must understand the slang word that is inverted. Take for example the following NTM lyric: "prêt à se péta pour des scalpas" ("C'est arrivé près d'chez toi"). First one must know to convert *péta* into *taper* and *scalpas* into *pascals*. Then you must speak *argot* well enough to know that *se taper* means (in this case) "to fight" and that *pascals* refers to the now defunct 500 Francs bill. The double coding creates a barrier between those who understand and the rest of the listeners who must translate and then translate again.

***Marseille's own dialect***

Marseille has its own form of regional *argot* that requires multilingual capacity: provençal. Although it is a fully formed regional dialect with its own grammatical rules, it serves a slang function in rap music. Much like *verlan*, it is not so much a language to be spoken in whole sentences or phrases but a source of unique and area-specific vocabulary. In his article on the Socio-

Linguistics of Marseille, Gasquet Cyrus explains its limitations: "It has no large communicative function, but it does have a strong symbolic one" (Gasquet-Cyrus 2004, 113). Its figurative role is to represent the city and its resistance against its more powerful northern neighbors who only speak French. The most common words of Provençal found in the corpus are *dégun* ("nobody") and *fada* ("crazy")[26].

These words are used in conjunction with region specific slang that is not derived from provençal. Together they create the vocabulary of Marseillais rap that is distinct. In the two albums that I analyzed there were 32 instances of Marseille specific *argot*. La Fonky Family provides the best full sentence example in its song "Sans Rémission": "Je sème des rimes tampis si je passe pour un fada"[27]. First there is an example of French that has been regionally mutated by Marseille in the transformation of *tant pis* into *tampis*. Secondly there is the commonly used Provençal word for crazy: *fada*[28]. Much like the Parisian rappers and their *verlan*, this specialized vocabulary is a coded mark of regional identity.

**Slang**

Given the American origin of rap music, it is not surprising that English occupies a large role in the vocabulary of French hip-hop. It is interesting that the already quoted citation from Afro Jazz does not make a distinction between *argot* and *slang*. It provokes the question: "How much of each are represented?" Studying the corpus with an analytical eye provides some interesting data on the different usage of the two. The data shows that American slang makes up 26% of all colloquial speech (the combination of French Argot, langue du bled, and English). This percentage is higher significantly in higher Paris (33%) than in Marseille (17%).

Bazin provides a rudimentary categorization of American slang in French rap.

[26] Recently, much like *meuf* and *keuf*, *fada* has escaped regional use and is even now use in Paris.

[27] "I sow rhymes, too bad if I pass for a crazy" (La Fonky Family, "Sans Rémission"). It is worth noting that the verse continues with a rare example of Spanish *langue du bled*: "Que je récolte nada". This is very specific to La Fonky Family since one of the group's rappers, Le Rat Luciano, is half Spanish.

[28]

> Les mots empruntés à l'américain appartiennent à trois registres principaux: ceux qui sont liés à la pratique ou le style artistique; ceux qui précisent l'appartenance au mouvement ou à ses manifestations; ceux qui appartiennent aux rituels d'insultes (Bazin 1995, 48)[29].

This tripartite division is mostly accurate, though it is not complete. In my study, I propose an alternative to this model that divides American slang into two broader and more significant categories: the useful and the ornamental. The former is defined as a word that expresses something that cannot be said in French, and the latter is one that is used merely for effect and serves no poetic, emotional, or communicative function. In the data we see that ornamental slang comprises 77% of all American slang (292 out of 380 English words).

In some measure, Bazin's approach only considers the *useful* slang. Examples of this kind are certainly found throughout the corpus. Words like *beat*, *DJ*, *MC*, and *crew* are all aligned with the artistic practice or to "l'appartenance au mouvement ou à ses manifestations" (Bazin 1995, 48). The most interesting examples of this sort pertain to artistic style. When a rapper uses a word like *hardcore* or *funky* he is expressing a thought that does not have a homologue in the French language. Thus *le slang* goes beyond an expression of the non-French and becomes a poetic tool. The centuries old dream of the Académie Française to keep the language pure has also prevented it from creating new and necessary words.

Bazin's third categorization needs to be reconsidered. While insult words like *fuck* and *motherfucker* may be used in an insult, they are hardly limited to this usage. For example, Afro Jazz uses the "f-word" as a noun ("méfie-toi des fucks") as an imperative verb used in a slogan ("fuck l'extrême droite") and as an action verb ("je fuck le budget"). While all of these usages are intended to denigrate the target of the rapper's rage, they are not simply a part of the ritual of insults.

Given my previous explanation of the importance of *niquer*, the usage of *fuck* is potentially ornamental. While it is capable of expressing rage, there is a French term that articulates the same feeling. Afro Jazz employs the English epithet seven times in their album and employs its French equivalent nine. There are less vulgar examples of English being used gratuitously. For

[29] "Words that are borrowed from American English belong to three principal registers: those that are tied to artistic style or practices: those that indicate belonging to the movement; those that belong to the rituals of insulting" (Bazin 1995, 48).

example, when la Fonky Family uses the word *lady* instead of *femme*[30], it serves no real purpose other than some superficial exoticness.

Although this kind of English usage is apparently unnecessary, there is a global significance to its presence that goes beyond specific words. The usage of English is yet another form of rebellion. Much like the *langue du bled* and the word *niquer*, the presence of Americanisms is capable of indicating social distinction and rage. In this way it has symbolic power that goes beyond the crass usage of English seen in popular advertising. I must stress that utilizing *le slang* is not forcibly pro-American, but instead could be considered anti-French[31]. In a 1996 *Figaro* poll the respondents claimed that English was the greatest danger to the French language. This poll was roughly contemporary to the music in this corpus and it shows that there is palpable fear that more English could lead to less "*frenchness*." Its presence in French rap then must indicate yet another loss in the battle for the purity of the language, and perhaps by extension, of the country itself.

Not surprisingly, the xenophobic right wing of France has capitalized on the perceived Americanization of French through hip-hop culture. Instead of appreciating the fact that it is one of the few remaining forms of music in French that has an international market, they have chosen to focus on the perceived corruption of *le bon français*. While still a member of the Front National, Bruno Megret condemned la "sous-culture rock-rap-tag-Coca" (Chebel 1996, 366). In this quote he makes an important alliance of American influences. First, he lowers the culture itself by making it a mere sub-culture. Then, he conflates two nearly opposite forms of music (rock and rap). He follows this by adding a vandalistic form of visual expression (tag). He ends his list with a clear symbol of capitalistic imperialism (Coca-Cola). The American vocabulary that populates the French lyrics becomes like the bottle of soda that has replaced the red wine on the dinner table.

## Conclusion

If the Front National is looking for some form of homogenous purity in France, it could not think of a more appropriate foe than Rap music. This new and foreign culture rose to prominence just as the *beurs* and other waves of first generation immigrants were starting to change the face of the country. Hip-hop spoke to this generation while giving a quadrilingual voice to its rage. The relationship between the far right and rap music becomes almost like the

[30] "Que les ladys clamsent" ("That the women die", Fonky Family, "La Résistance").
[31] Of course, the usage of English can also serve as a means of showing ones knowledge of another language.

proverbial chicken and the egg. Did societal alienation and racial hostility force the marginalized youth to gravitate toward rap music? Or, did the purposeful rejection of Frenchness and hostility towards authority found in rap music force conservative factions to condemn the art form as well as its adherents?

It is not in the purview of this article to solve this riddle. However, one cannot help but note how this struggle is manifested in the vocabulary of the music. The desired purity of France is directly at odds with the hybridity of the language that is found in rap. Every single lyric uttered by a quadrilingual rapper carries symbolic value. If it is in French then it could indicate the triumph of French cultural policy, the successful linguistic integration of first generation immigrants as well as the eternal poetic value of the language itself. Should the word be in a *langue du bled*, it could reflect the increasing cultural and demographical presence of citizens of non-European heritage. Furthermore, it could represent a refusal to wholly assimilate and a wilful resistance to the concept that a pure France exists or should exist. If the word is an example of *argot* it can represent an attempt to surpass the linguistic bounds of standard French or it could be a coded signal that indicates the rappers region of origin. Finally, if the word is in *English* it can be a useful addition to the limited vocabulary of French or it can reflect a further rejection of concepts of French purity.

## APPENDIX: The Data.

**All Groups In Corpus**
Total Words in Corpus 35,429
Subjunctive: 46
Argot: 930
Verlan: 81
Words du Bled (total): 135
Arabic: *90*
All colloquial speech (argot + Mot de Bled + English): 1445
English (total): 380
Useful: *88*
Ornamental: *292*
Percentage of Ornamental Slang: 77%
Percentage of English in relation to all colloquial speech: 26%

**NTM**
Subjunctive: 15
Argot: 202
Verlan: 20
Words du Bled (total): 27
Arabic: 5
English (total): 120
Useful: 15
Ornamental: 105

**Afro Jazz**
Subjunctive: 13
Argot: 290
Verlan: 58
Words du Bled (total): 25
Arabic: 10
English (total): 152
Useful: 36
Ornamental: 116

**All Groups from Paris**
Subjunctive: 28
Argot: 492
Verlan: *78*
Mot de Bled (total): 52
Arabic: *15*
All colloquial speech (argot + Mot de Bled + English): 816
English (total): 272
Useful: *51*
Ornamental*: 221*
Percentage of Ornamental Slang: 81%
Percentage of English in relation to all colloquial speech: 33%

**Freeman**
Subjunctive: 9
Argot: 198
Verlan: 0
Marseille Specific Slang: 12
Words du Bled (total): 40
Arabic: 35
English (total): 38
Useful: 7
Ornamental: 31

**Fonky Family**
Subjunctive: 9
Argot: 240
Verlan: 3
Marseille Specific Slang: 21
Words du Bled (total): 43
Arabic: 40
English (total): 70
Useful: 30
Ornamental: 40

**All groups from Marseille**
Subjunctive: 18
Argot: 438
    Verlan: *3*
    Marseille Specific Slang: 33
Words du Bled (total): 83
    Arabic: 75
All colloquial speech (argot + Mot de Bled + English): 629
English (total): 108
    Useful: 37
    Ornamental: 71
    Percentage of Ornamental Slang: 65%
Percentage of English in relation to all colloquial speech: 17%

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**Keywords**
Rap, Hip-Hop, French, Linguistic, Hybridity.

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**Résumé**

Les paroles associées au rap constituent une hybridation entre un discours improvisé et une poésie soigneusement écrite. À ce titre, lorsque soumises à une analyse linguistique, celles-ci sont emplies de contradictions. Elles offrent deux types de langages qui apparaissent souvent antithétiques lorsque l'on développe un corpus d'étude. Les mots que les rappeurs prononcent ne constituent ni une versification pure, ni de la prose, mais plutôt une imitation du discours agencé à de la musique. Cette simulation de la communication verbale trahit une tendance métalinguistique et expose une volonté délibérée de faire l'usage d'un discours symbolique. C'est à partir de cet angle que le linguiste doit approcher la musique hip-hop. Il ne faut pas accorder trop d'importance à ce qui est dit, mais plutôt évaluer comment ce qui est dit représente la personne qui prononce le discours. L'objectif de cette étude est d'analyser le vocabulaire utilisé par le rap français et d'en extraire une plus grande signification symbolique. L'auteur démontrera comment les mots choisis par les paroliers reflètent l'hybridation de la société à travers un mélange complexe de quatre différents types d'énoncés linguistiques : le français normé, le slang français, le slang américain et les diverses *langues de bled*.