

Negotiating Alternative Linguistic Practices: The Struggle between Verlan Usage and the Académie Française

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Abstract

The aim of this study is to understand the challenges between the traditional bodies in France, such as the Académie Française, and “verlan”, a unique French slang originating from the Parisian *banlieues*. The Académie Française, a linguistic organisation formed in 1635, may be regarded as a protector of the French language, rejecting, and creating French versions of many foreign words and concepts and maintaining the purity of the French language. But is it now facing a challenge regarding the increasingly popular use of verlan and verlan’s place within the Francophone? Whilst verlan’s everyday use is mainly restricted to the Parisian *banlieues*, its increasing usage in popular culture, in particular rap music, is an increasingly popular countercultural movement to traditionalist bodies such as the Académie Française. This study aims to understand the growing significance of verlan and what its meaning and usage means for traditionalists. This study will include analysis of popular music lyrics and films from the ethnic minority dominated Parisian *banlieues*, as well as mainstream French culture to understand the growing usage of this original slang within contemporary creative industries. This will include an analysis of the demographics using Verlan and to understand its role within the identities of the users in an ever-changing France. In addition, there will be an examination as to how the establishment responds to this constantly evolving language.

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to understand the status of verlan in modern day France as a countercultural movement to the traditional linguistic policies set by the French Republic. The French language has long been guarded and protected by the French state. In 1992 the constitution of the Fifth Republic was amended with the first article now declaring that “the

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language of the Republic is French" (LOI constitutionnelle no 92-554 du 25 juin 1992 ajoutant à la Constitution un titre : Des Communautés européennes et de l'Union européenne).

The standard French language which is recognised nowadays as "French" was only spoken by around ten percent of the French population in 1790, with most people speaking regional languages (Okrent, 2015). Therefore, a lingua franca, or common language to unite the French people was necessary. Rather than French simply becoming a lingua franca or a second language, regional languages were suppressed in favour of standard French. With the introduction of compulsory education in France in 1882 with the Jules Ferry laws (Jules Ferry rend l'enseignement primaire obligatoire, n.d.), the French language became the official and only permitted language to be used in French schools (James and Lambert, 2009, p. 4). The French language was not spoken by all French people until the mid-20th Century (James and Lambert, 2009, p. 1).

Even though French is constitutionally the official language of France, dozens of other languages still exist. Bernard Cerquiglini noted 75 languages (mostly from outside Metropolitan France) which would qualify for recognition by the European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages (Le ministère de la Culture, 2021). The European Charter for Regional or Minority Languages was signed by France in 1992 but is yet to be ratified as of March 2021; it would have provided more socio-linguistic and political support to these minority languages. Nevertheless, these languages are recognised by article 75.1 of the French Constitution, Article 75-1: (a new article): "Les langues régionales appartiennent au patrimoine de la France" ("Regional languages belong to the patrimony of France"). One of the main reasons why France has dithered on ratifying the Charter is due to the concerns of the Republic that the power and unity of the French language would be undermined (Harguindéguy and Itçaina, 2011, p. 11).

The Académie Française's main function is to maintain and preserve the purity of the French language (L'histoire | Académie française, 2021). This function is currently facing the test of the increased prominence of verlan, which is rooted in the counterculture of France, particularly in urban areas such as the Parisian *banlieues*² although it is also commonly spoken in towns which are perceived to have high Maghrebi populations such as Belleville-en-Beaujolais in Auvergne-Rhône Alpes where verlan is particularly concentrated in the "quartier Aiguerande", which gathers people from low socio-economic backgrounds and/or Maghrebi population. In this article, verlan's origins will be explained along with its cultural significance. Also in this article, there will be an investigation into verlan's place in France amongst the traditional protection of the French language by the Académie Française, which has thus far ignored the inclusion of verlan in its most recent volumes despite including other French slangs. This article will explain the purposes of the Académie Française in a historical and modern context, and what verlan is: its purpose, its origins, its users. It will also explore verlan's use in popular culture, and what the Académie Française thinks about verlan.

² *Banlieue* [FR] = translated as suburb [EN].

What is the Académie Française?

The Académie Française was set up in 1635 by Cardinal Richelieu, the principal minister to King Louis XIII (L'histoire | Académie française, 2021, para. 1). Its historical purpose was to protect the purity of the French language (L'histoire | Académie française, 2021). The Académie Française was temporarily suspended in 1793, during the French Revolution, but was restored under Napoleon Bonaparte in 1803. It was inspired by the Accademia della Crusca founded in 1583 to “eliminate the impurities” of the Italian language and also standardise one formal Italian language which was based on the Tuscan dialect (Accademia della Crusca, 2011). The story of standard French mirrored that of Italian, with the standard form being based upon one particular dialect. In the case of French, this was the language spoken by the Parisian elite.

At the time of the Académie Française's founding, the French language was in the process of replacing Latin as the language of European diplomacy and international relations (Nadeau and Barlow, 2006). The positive reputation and prestige associated with the French language continued until at least the Great War, with the revered *salons de conversation* becoming a trend for European elites from the Enlightenment to the Great War (Wright, 2016). Since the end of the Second World War, the English language has grown to become a major global language due to the soft power and cultural influence of the United States rather than enforcement through colonialism (Crystal, 2003; Nye, 1990). However, the French language still maintains its global reputation and is still revered by educated, and elite socio-economic classes around the world. Although, it does appear that the French language is fighting to maintain its status in the face of the popularity of English which is particularly notable through the rise of the internet and social media.

In more recent years, the Académie Française has come to regard the English language as a threat to the purity of French (thelocal.fr, 2020). This can be dated to at least the 1990s with the rise of the internet and technology (Baron, 2003). It was common for French people to start using the original English words associated with the rising use of Anglophone technology (thelocal.fr, 2020). This has increased rapidly with the use of social media. As of 2020, 25.9% of the internet's pages globally are in English, with [Mandarin Chinese] in second place at 19.4%, while 3.3% of internet pages are in French which is relatively low for a global language (Statista, 2021). For access to more internet pages, the English language is more practical than French. Many social media sites depend on the English language with hashtags most commonly used in English. For those seeking popularity through social media, utilising the English language is necessary in order to reach the widest audiences and garner the most support. With social media becoming more and more popular, more French speakers are using English words on their social media to gain more attention than they would have been afforded using French.

In an attempt to preserve and maintain the French language's popularity, the Académie Française has notably created French versions of globally used (often English) words, such as *déjeunette* (brunch), *chien-chaud* (literal translation of “hot-dog”), *gomme à mâcher* (literal translation of “chewing-gum”). The French words created by the Académie Française are often side-lined by the French public who choose to adopt the internationally-used words instead (thelocal.fr, 2020).

The Académie Française's policing of the French language also includes the very rigorous assigning of grammatical elements of new words. The Covid-19 pandemic which emerged on a global scale in 2020, produced the word "covid." As it is a globally recognised medical term, the Académie Française did not offer a Frenchified term for it, although, a debate emerged as to which linguistic gender "covid" should be. The "le Covid" versus "la Covid" debate was discussed by the Académie Française who leaned towards "la covid" (thelocal.fr, 2020). A tweet from @Mediavenir³ (11th May 2021) suggested that the dictionary was considering that it should be "le covid", in the masculine form without a capital C due to Francophone speakers across the Francophonie already predominantly referring to Covid as "le covid." The Académie Française appeared to ignore this as it was leaning towards Covid being addressed in the feminine and with a capital C due to the word « maladie⁴ » using the feminine as most words associated with sickness in French use the feminine form (France24, 2020). However, there are other illnesses in French which use the masculine form such as « le mal des transports⁵ ». This demonstrates that the tension between linguists and the Académie Française is a daily struggle which encompasses a range of linguistic decisions.

What is verlan? Is it intentionally a countercultural movement?

Verlan is a type of argot or anti-language based predominantly on French. It is derived from the French word « l'envers » meaning "inverse". Its function is based on inverting and switching vowels. It does not rely solely on the French language for the root of its words as it commonly utilises words from immigrant languages spoken in France such as Arabic. For example, "Bilad" is Arabic for "country" and is inverted in verlan as « blédard », combining cultural elements or situations that North Africans face in France with the words « bled » and by extension « ringard » meaning somebody without legal papers; in other words, an illegal or undocumented immigrant (Airault, 2007). Shohat and Stam (2012, p. 146) suggest that verlan takes inspiration from "Arabic, African languages, black American slang, and French gangster argot⁶".

Its exact history is unknown. Some claim that it emerged after the Second World War (Gee, 2016). Gee (2016) observes that Verlan's original use was to provide secret words for controversial topics such as drugs and sex, but that its usage has grown exponentially in the last few decades and encompasses a wide range of vocabulary. It gained popularity during the 1980s and 1990s, which may be attributed to the age of second and third-generation African migrants. France saw a major influx of migration from its (former) colonies during the 1960s (McDonald, 1969). The 1980s and 1990s would mark teenagerhood for those born in France between the 1960s and 1980s, who would by this era be likely users of slang.

The French language has produced other types of complex slang including *javanais*⁷ which includes using extra syllables in standard French words to throw off any eavesdroppers. The

³ @Mediavenir

« FLASH - Le petit #Robert a tranché et écrit le covid au masculin sans majuscule. Le dictionnaire considère ainsi que "l'usage fait loi" et que le mot "#covid" est majoritairement utilisé au masculin dans les pays francophones. (La dépêche) #COVID19 ».

⁴ Maladie [FR] – illness/sickness [EN]

⁵ Le mal des transports [FR] – travel/motion sickness [EN]

⁶ Argot [FR] - translated as slang [EN]

⁷ There are three translations of *javanais* in English. In this instance it refers to the slang, although it is also a genre of music and also the translation of the Javanese [EN] language.

French slang known as *louchébem* bears partial resemblance to verlan, with some records suggesting it dates back to 1821 in the Brest prison in Brest, western France (Robert L'Argenton, 1991, p. 114). With its origins seemingly as a prison slang, it is possible that it was used by prisoners who did not want any listeners fully understanding their conversations. « *Louchébem* » is a scramble of the French word « *boucher*⁸ » with extra syllables added in true *louchébem* fashion (Robert L'Argenton, 1991, p. 114). For a while, this led people to believe that it was created by Parisian butchers who used a similar slang to *louchébem* (Robert L'Argenton, 1991, p. 114). The main principle of these slangs was adding or substituting letters or sound clusters in mainstream French words, to create a new form of speech that outsiders would not understand. A further example of *louchébem* being used as a secret language is through its usage by younger members of the French Résistance during the Second World War and during the Nazi occupation of France (Instant City, n.d., para. 8). Whilst it is unknown why *louchébem* fell out of use, it is possible that it could be due to its increasing popularity and thus increasingly mainstream nature. French Resistance member and broadcaster for BBC Services Londres during the Second World War and later humourist, Pierre Dac, is known for popularising *louchébem* words such as « *loufoque*⁹ » from « *fou*¹⁰ ». The word *loufoque* entered mainstream French and was included in the ninth edition of the dictionary by the Académie Française (Dictionnaire de l'Académie française, n.d.).

Evidence that verlan is a countercultural linguistic tool is evident through the use of double verlan or « *veul* ». This has often occurred once an original verlan word has entered mainstream usage. This enables the continuation of verlan and will theoretically stop it from having the same ending as *louchébem*. Double verlan takes original verlan words, such as « *meuf* » and « *beur* ». « *Meuf* » originates from the word « *femme* » to mean “woman”. The word « *meuf* » has since been used in many popular culture outlets, including in films, popular music, modern literature, and even through journalism. Originally it was used to describe a woman who was perceived as sexually attractive, although according to thelocal.fr (2019), it has been reclaimed by women who use it to refer to female friends. « *Meuf* » has since gone through the process of double verlan and has been inversed again as « *feumeu* ». The connotations and usage of « *meuf* » and « *feumeu* » appear to be the same, thus its process of being double verlanised is seemingly to reinstate the secrecy and countercultural inaccessibility of verlan words. « *Beur* » derived from “arabe” is another example of this. « *Beur* » for masculine and often « *beurette* » for feminine, typically refers to those of Maghrebi origins. The term has become increasingly utilised not just throughout France but also throughout Europe in countries with large Maghrebi populations. « *Beur* » was inversed again during the 1990s as « *rebeu* » which is only used in the masculine form. « *Beur* », whilst recognised as being an informal or familiar word, is used throughout mainstream French media. It has also been used pejoratively as a slur for Maghrebis although its origin was seemingly not to be an offensive term. A local radio station, Beur FM, originated in 1989, with the majority of broadcasts in French but also with many in Maghrebi Arabic and Berber languages (Achoui-Lesage, 2015). It is sensible to assume that due to the rising awareness of the word *beur* through Beur FM, the media, and popular culture, the inversion took place to act as a countercultural confusion once again to the mainstream masses. Verlan is unlikely to become extinct as *louchébem* was more of an underground slang which did not reach the

⁸ Boucher [FR] = translated as butcher [EN]

⁹ [FR] loufoque – wacky / zany / eccentric [EN]

¹⁰ [FR] fou – mad / crazy [EN]

same level of exposure as verlan. Therefore, it can be inferred that the double inversion takes place to maintain the countercultural identity of verlan and its users.

Where is verlan spoken?

Verlan originated in the Parisian *banlieues* or *projects*. The term « *banlieue* » is often translated into English to mean “suburb.” Whilst this is correct, a large cultural significance is attached to the French word. As MacCumber (2017, p. 5) notes, the English word “suburb” often produces the idea of a safe, wealthy neighbourhood in close proximity to a metropolitan area; whereas *banlieue* refers to suburbs which are comparable to “inner-city” dwellings. Often made up of cheaply constructed high rise tower blocks, high levels of crime, and high migrant and working-class populations, the *banlieues* are almost a direct juxtaposition to English language’s idea of the *suburbs*.

The *banlieues* were constructed rapidly after the Second World War. Before the War, France had had a near open-door migration policy with an influx of Spaniards fleeing Franco’s dictatorship in Spain (Peschanski, 2000). After the Second World War, France began to tighten its immigration policy due to the vast numbers of Europeans displaced as a result of the War (Miles, 1986). The need for housing increased in the 1960s when the French empire began to collapse with a domino effect. Particularly devastating for France was the loss of some of its African colonies, notably Algeria in a protracted long bloody war, ultimately ending with Algeria’s independence. A large influx of former colonial migration, mostly from Africa, ensued at this time. Paris, as the capital city, was the primary destination for many migrants. As mentioned earlier, verlan appeared to originate after the Second World War, and seemed to undergo increased uptake during the 1980s and 1990s. Whilst many former colonial migrants spoke French to some degree (be it with native-like fluency or conversational), it appears that the children of these migrants, that is the first generation born in France began to claim verlan as their own street language. Shohat and Stam (2012, p. 146) note that the period of the 1990s was significant for the influence of African communities in France which comprises a large proportion of verlan speakers. They observe that Paris became the capital for African fashion during the late 1980s into the 1990s. African cultures became more fashionable and embraced by French people and along came the increased exposure to verlan due to the higher consumption of African-French popular culture (Shohat and Stem, 2012, p. 146). They also add that Paris had become the “main global centre for the diffusion of African and Arab...music” with a popular re-emergence of Raï music which emerged in Algeria during the 1920s (Shohat and Stam, 2012, p. 146). Raï singers such as Rachid Taha, who spent most lot of his childhood in the suburb of Saint-Denis in Seine-Saint-Denis, sometimes used verlan in his songs which were popular at the time.

Seine-Saint-Denis is one of the departments¹¹ in the suburbs of Paris most associated with verlan and it has a large population of African origins. Whilst it is illegal in France to collect statistics regarding ethnicity, it is evident that many people who live in Saint-Seine-Denis are of African descent to some extent. Collecting data on ethnicity is illegal in France, with the general ideological notion that everyone who speaks French is regarded as French although this has also been criticised as being overly simplistic and ignoring the racism which occurs in

¹¹ A French department or « département » refers to the administrative divisions of France.

France (James and Lambert, 2009, p. 2). One legalised and official form of statistical gathering is through documenting immigration, including the illegal immigrant percentage. In 2018, it was estimated that between 8-20% of the population in the department of Seine-Saint-Denis were illegal immigrants (Leclerc, 2018). Much of France's non-EU immigration is from Africa, with some entering France as undocumented immigrants due to a complication of factors.

Verlan is often synonymous with the non-ethnic European populations living in the Parisian *banlieues* with the sometimes synonymous idea of the *banlieues* being associated with African immigration. As Mathieu Kassovitz's film *La Haine* demonstrates, there are ethnic Europeans who do live in the *banlieues* and do use verlan thus it is not only confined to those of African ethnicities despite the widespread associations. As *La Haine*¹² demonstrates, the *banlieues* are usually inhabited by those of more deprived socio-economic groups which happen to include a high proportion of those of African ethnicities although other ethnicities, including ethnic French people do live there and use verlan. By contrast, the Académie Française is an elitist organisation made up of predominantly men who were educated at France's *grandes écoles*¹³ (thelocal.fr, 2020),

Verlan in popular culture

The use of Verlan has at times, wound its way into mainstream French. Words such as « keuf », « meuf », « chelou » and « Paname » are verlan words which are used more and more in mainstream French, notably occurring in many contemporary French films. Some films with scenes set in the *banlieues* such as « *Banlieusards* » and hit films « *Untouchables* » and « *La Haine* » have high usages of verlan.

MacCumber (2017, p. 6) claims that Mathieu Kassovitz's film *La Haine* is the first film to depict the *banlieues* in France. MacCumber (2017, p. 6) suggests that prior to the release of *La Haine* in 1995, many French people were aware of the existence of the *banlieues* but often ignored them and regarded them simply as "the dumping ground for the poor", so far detached and removed from many people's lives. The premise of *La Haine* is nineteen hours amongst three characters after the shooting of a man by a police officer. It is set in a Parisian *banlieue* in the department of Yvelines near Paris. The three protagonists are Jewish, black African, and North African. The ethnicities and religions of the three protagonists were designed to be representative of the diversity of the *banlieues*.

Abdellatif Kechiche's 2004 film « *L'Esquive*¹⁴ » introduced verlan words from the *banlieues* of Seine-Saint-Denis to viewers, including words such as « *ambiancer* » from the word « *draguer* » which has, according to Airault (2007, para. 4), since entered mainstream usage. The film focuses on young people of predominantly North African ethnic origins living in the *banlieues*. It portrays the characters in a realistic way by showing them in realistic daily life situations as well as avoiding a common film trope of grouping them together as a unified North African group who are going through a shared experience. The film highlights the fact that ethnic

¹² For information and examples of the verlan used in the film *La Haine*, please follow this link:

http://www.cinemafrancais-fle.com/Films/la_haine.php

¹³ Grandes écoles [FR] – this is a series of elitist academic institutions in France. The UK equivalent includes Eton, and Oxbridge.

¹⁴ [FR] « *esquive* » - to con / to back out of something in a negative sense [EN]

groups do not have the same unifying mindsets and are individuals. *L'Esquive* became popular in France and abroad, winning the César Award for Best Film, Best Director, Best Writing and Most Promising Actress. Due to its success, many viewers were exposed to the new verlan words, thus moving some of these words into the mainstream and popular usage.

Popular French rappers such as Grand Corps Malade, ethnically white-French from Seine-Saint-Denis, and MC Solaar from Senegal but raised in Seine-Saint-Denis along with other Parisian *banlieues*, often use verlan in their songs. Many of the songs by *banlieue* rappers record the lifestyles within the *banlieues*. One example of this is *Je viens de là*¹⁵ by Grande Corps Malade. The lyrics are primarily about the nature of those living in the *banlieues*, noting the positives and negatives of living there. One particular lyric¹⁶ in the song mentions the lack of shock *banlieusards*¹⁷ have in the name of a band itself « *Nique Ta Mère* » also from Saint-Denis. The name of the band translates into English as “Fuck Your Mother” and is often used as an insult in a similar fashion to its English translation. « *Nique* » a conjugated word from « *niquer* » is slang and in its own way, a type of verlan. The original word is from North African Sabir Arabic, “نكح” (phonetically: *nik*) which is the verb, “to have sex”. The word « *niquer* » appears to have entered the mainstream in France but it is considered highly vulgar and quite shocking; hence the lyric shows that nobody in the *banlieues* is shocked by this in contrast to mainstream French society. « *Niquer* » has not entered the dictionary of the Académie Française. The band, *Nique Ta Mère* has been around since 1989 and their music is often focused on issues affecting many of those living in the *banlieues*, this includes: racism, discrimination, police brutality, and social inequality. They often referred to Jean-Marie Le Pen, the founder of the far-right Islamophobia anti-immigrant party Front National in their earlier works. *Nique Ta Mère* has had several legal altercations with the police, on a few occasions due to their strong criticisms of the police force. With the increasing awareness of police brutality in Western countries, such as the U.S. against black, Hispanic/Latinx, and First Nation Americans, as well as in France against North African and black French people, it appears that *Nique Ta Mère*'s music may find itself having a resurgence.

It is notable through anecdotal experience that most French people have been exposed to some verlan words and probably do use them in their daily lives, but not all of verlan's usage is widely understood by all French people. This suggests that verlan's status and survival as an alternative, countercultural, anti-mainstream form of expression is still intact.

It makes sense that those who use verlan in their songs, films, and art often originate from the *banlieues* and grew up using verlan like a mother tongue. Nevertheless, as is common with language evolution, exposure through popular culture often encourages certain word usage and is even used as a teaching tool (Rets, 2016). The artists using verlan in their popular and widely viewed creations are in fact, sharing verlan with the mainstream and mass public. Their use of verlan can be intentional or in contrast be an inadvertent result of the consumption of their works. It depends entirely on the artist themselves and it is difficult to say whether it is one way or another for all. Rap artist Grand Corps Malade frequently uses verlan intentionally as much of his music, especially early in his career, is produced for fellow inhabitants of the *banlieues*. Artists may in fact be giving away their common language formed by the diversity and challenges of the *banlieues* to mass mainstream audiences who may not always follow

¹⁵ Je viens de là [FR] – I come from there [EN]

¹⁶ Je viens de là où ça choque personne qu'un groupe s'appelle « Nique Ta Mère » [FR] – I come from where it shocks nobody that a band is called “Fuck Your Mother” [EN]

¹⁷ Banlieusards [FR] – people who are from or live in the *banlieues* [EN]

the significances of verlan words. However, it is important to note that much of the art created using verlan has often had overall themes of the hardships and struggles that *banlieusards* face, including systemic poverty, as well as racism and the struggles between their own mixed cultural identities and that of the French Republic for those who are not completely French. The words « beur » and « rebeu » are often used to refer specifically to those of Maghrebi descent who were born in Europe who are struggling to hold both identities as someone born and raised in Europe and the cultures of parents or grandparents born as Maghrebis in the Maghreb. Modern French cinema is often regarded as honest and realistic, rarely showing exaggeration, and instead focusing on creating the human aspect to regard (Penketh, 2014). Raising awareness of the struggles facing the *banlieusards* with the slang used by so many is maybe necessary to accurately portray the *banlieues* and their differences with mainstream France, albeit at the likely cost of making verlan lose its status as a countercultural tool.

What does the Académie Française think of Verlan?

The Académie Française places great emphasis on the connection between language, patrimony, and culture (Decaux, 2001). The French language is often treated as the most important soft power¹⁸ tool for France (Brown, 2016). Whilst few verlan words have entered the dictionary of the Académie Française, it is unclear whether this is due to the Académie Française's rejection of verlan or whether there are other factors that account for this lack of recognition. As mentioned, not all French speakers are familiar with many verlan words, and some have never heard of verlan at all; hence numerous newspaper articles (including highly contemporary ones) have had to introduce the concept to their readerships. This suggests that newspapers are trying to keep up to date and are responding to the changing demographics of its readership. Typically, newspapers rarely conform to the Frenchified words put forward by the Académie Française and prefer to use words used by the mass public such as « hotdog » rather than the Académie Française's « chien-chaud ».

The current ninth edition of the Académie Française's dictionary has been in the works since 1935, with the most recent volume of it (*Maquereau à Quotité*) having been released in 2011. Whilst it is regarded as the official overseer of the French language, as the Académie Française takes a long time to publish complete editions, more up-to-date dictionaries such as *Petit Larousse* may include more recent words. *Petit Larousse* recognises some verlan words that have wide usage, such as « meuf » (Larousse, n.d.). It appears that even verlan words in wide usage are not really included in the dictionary of the Académie Française at present, although some English words such as "piano-bar" and "baffle" (le dictionnaire, n.d.) have been included. Thus, it is noteworthy that the Académie Française does include a section on foreign words

¹⁸ *Soft Power* is a term associated with political scientist Joseph Nye. Nye has written extensively throughout his career on soft power. According to Nye, it is when a power (usually a state) encourages another actor to do something without using force or coercion. Many tools of soft power include language, diplomacy, cultural attractiveness, history etc.

For key works by Nye, see:

Nye, J. (1990). *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature Of American Power*. 1st ed. Basic Books.

Nye, J. (2006). Think Again Power. *Foreign Policy*. Available at: <https://foreignpolicy.com/2006/02/23/think-again-soft-power/> [Accessed: 18 Nov. 2020].

For how Soft Power is measured and calculated, see: USC Centre on Public Diplomacy. (2020). France. [online] The Soft Power 30. Available at: <https://softpower30.com/country/france/> [Accessed 29 March 2020].

but does not seem to include *verlan*. The word *verlan* in its own right does not appear in the dictionary. Does this mean that the Académie Française has completely overlooked or rejected the *banlieue* slang?

One potential reason for Académie Française non-recognition of *verlan* is likely because it is seen as a “corruption” of the French language. Whilst English words have historically been regarded by the Académie Française as a threat, it seems that the manipulation and corruption of French words by *verlan* has been regarded as having a negative impact on the purity of the language. However, the Académie Française recognises some words of *louchébem* origin.

Therefore, the Académie Française’s disregard of *verlan* is in connection with *verlan*’s users; that is, with the majority French African users. As mentioned previously, *verlan* does not only use French words but it also uses words from the migrant languages of the *banlieues* such as Arabic. Most of the foreign population living within the *banlieues* appear to be from Francophone African countries. As the French language was heavily imposed on its colonies, many of the migrants from Francophone African countries have some knowledge of French although may speak a slightly different dialect of French (France Diplomatie, 2017). It is estimated that by 2050, most of the French speakers in the world will be Africans within the African continent (Diallo, 2015, p. 68). Many French-African dialects include some words from other African languages, possibly due to their high and convenient usages in other languages, or due to French lacking specific cultural expressions or concepts which are easily explained in other languages. Most Francophone African countries are multilingual and most of the people are also bilingual or multilingual (Eastman, 1992). It is common in multilingual societies for code-switching to take place; that is, for people to use several languages within one conversation (Eastman, 1992). Whilst African-French words typically do not become widespread in Metropolitan France, they do appear in the *banlieues* and make their way into *verlan*. It is not clear whether the Académie Française are opposed to the use of words from African languages being used amongst *verlan* speakers. The ninth edition of the Académie Française’s dictionary is yet to include words from any African languages aside from a couple from Arabic and one from Amharic (le dictionnaire, n.d.). Therefore, the ninth edition of the Académie Française’s dictionary appears to overlook the other African languages spoken in France. The Académie Française has accepted other foreign language words, including words from German, Italian, Spanish, Russian, Turkish, Vietnamese, with most of them being from English (le dictionnaire, n.d.). The Académie Française is linked with highly conservative and traditional thinking (thelocal.fr, 2020) thus their failure to recognise other African languages could be tied to colonial thinking especially the French policy of assimilation where the local culture in the colonies was seen as inferior and the local people were to be “Frenchified”. Although highly plausible given the conservative nature of the Académie Française, the contribution of colonial thinking may be limited due to the Académie Française’s recognition of Vietnamese words as Vietnam was also colonised by France. It is typically understood that there are more people of African descent than there are of Vietnamese descent in France, with those with African ethnicities making up a huge proportion of non-ethnic French people in France. Therefore, the conservative right-wing fear of those of African descent may be more at the forefront of the Académie Française’s colonial thinking than those of Vietnamese descent who make up a very small proportion of the French population.

Whilst *verlan* appears to have been overlooked by the Académie Française, which have released no statement about *verlan* although they recognised *louchébem*, the institution gave

the Médaille de la Chanson to French rapper and verlan user, MC Solaar in 1998 for his services to music (Shohat and Stam, 2012, p. 146). It is noteworthy that MC Solaar, whilst of Senegalese origins, spending much of his childhood in the *banlieues*, and rapping about many of the same themes as other *banlieue* verlan using rappers, MC Solaar is internationally renowned, has a postgraduate degree and is widely accepted by Anglophone rappers (Shohat and Stam, 2012, p. 146). He also mostly refrains from using more vulgar verlan words which may be why he is preferred by the Académie Française to other rappers who often drop shocking vulgar words such as « niquer » in their music. Overall, MC Solaar has a clean image with little controversy, unlike *Nique Ta Mère* and other French rappers who have been involved with some kind of controversy.

Conclusion

In conclusion, due to verlan's usage remaining rather confined to the *banlieues* and due to double-verlan and its speakers' desire to keep it from becoming a mainstream slang, verlan does not appear to pose any credible threat to the purity of the French language, so guarded by traditionalist institutions such as the Académie Française. However, as this article has demonstrated, its existence is recognised by many in France due to its use in popular media such as celebrated popular films including *La Haine* and *L'Esquive*. As rap music and realistic French cinema portraying the *banlieues* continue to be popular in France, it is possible that verlan's popularity will increase and more and more people will start using some of its words in their everyday lives, although not at the expense of completely modifying the French language. Whilst the use of double-verlan may attempt to reclaim verlan words that have expanded to mainstream audiences, will a triple-verlan need to emerge as double-verlan words will increasingly become accessible and utilised by the French public? Due to its use in the *banlieues* and increasingly in popular culture, it appears that verlan will not die out like louchébem and will instead continue to evolve and triple-verlan may indeed become a reality. It does appear that verlan is overlooked by the Académie Française who have not released any comments or even acknowledged verlan in their most recent dictionary. As the less popular and less understood louchébem was acknowledged by the Académie Française, it is possible that there may be linguistic, socio-economic, and ethnic prejudices at play for the Académie Française to not recognise or include a definition of the backwards slang which has been claimed by *banlieusards* since at least the 1980s.

**All translations have been self-conducted.*

***French words and expressions have used the French guillemets « » whilst English has used speech marks " ".*

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