

C'est pas blesipo: Variations of Verlan

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Abstract

Verlan is a language game that has long existed in France, but became widely-used by youth from the *banlieues*, the French suburban “ghetto,” in the 1970s. It reverses a Standard French word to produce a new form that acts both as a method of encryption and a marker of identity. Much work has already been done on the phonological operations behind *Verlan* and on its sociolinguistic setting in modern France. I analyzed the existing literature and four corpora spanning between 1991 and 2001 to determine which *Verlan* words did not follow the rules of transformation and whether there were any rules or sub-rules underlying these exceptions. I also performed a pilot experiment to determine whether *Verlan* could be easily learned and successfully learned by two native speakers of French. Both the analysis and the experiment showed that “correct” forms of *Verlan* do not depend on exactly following the rules of transformation or on other set principles; rather, they depend on knowing which rules the group applies to create specific terms. They also showed that *Verlan* has become harder to speak “correctly” over time. Today, knowing the tastes and conventions of the group of listeners is just as important as knowing the general rules of transformation, a sign that as *Verlan* becomes more widespread, its original speakers will create more exceptions and idiosyncrasies to maintain it as a marker for their identity and a method for linguistic concealment.¹

1.0 Background

Before investigating *Verlan* and the game’s restrictions, we must look at the existing research on language games and their usefulness in phonological study, French *argot* (slang), the

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sociological context for *Verlan* in French culture, and the existing phonological models for *Verlan*.

1.1 Language Games

Laycock (1972) coined the term “ludling,” a combination of the Latin *ludus* “game” and *lingua*, “language,” for language games, and the term is used henceforth in this paper. According to Davis (1994:1980), a ludling refers to “a widespread language play phenomenon in which phonological forms of words are systematically altered so as to disguise what they are.” The most famous ludling in modern English is Pig Latin, in which the word-initial consonant or consonant cluster is moved to the end and the vowel [e] is added after it. In Pig Latin, therefore, *I like cheese* becomes [aie aikle istʃe]. Many languages have ludlings of different sorts. Bagemihl (1995) divides ludlings into three types: affixing or infixing ludlings; templatic ludlings, in which the melodic portion of a standard language word is mapped onto a specified word-sized ludling template; and reversal ludlings. Reversal ludlings, including *Verlan*, involve “many different possible types of operations such as total segment or syllable reversal, transposition (moving a peripheral constituent to the opposite end of the word), interchange (switching the first two or the last two syllables), false syllable reversal (syllable reversal with timing properties held constant), and so on” (Bagemihl 1995:700).

For all ludlings, the difference between a root word and its form in a ludling is systematic and therefore potentially productive. A speaker presented with a root word can generate the ludling, and vice versa (Davis 1994). In addition, the morphology of ludlings is semantically empty. The elements added or changed in generating a ludling do not add any meaning; rather, “they signal that an exceptional register is being used to classify the speaker or hearer as belonging to a particular category of individuals” (Bagemihl 1995:700). Ludlings serve primarily

as a marker for the speaker's identity, not as a semantic addition to the sentence. *Verlan* is an exception to this rule in some respects. As will be discussed below, a word in *Verlan* can have its meaning enhanced, but not changed from the meaning in Standard French. Still, *Verlan* serves primarily as an identity marker, not as a semantic addition to a sentence.

Ludlings can serve two purposes for linguists. First, through their manipulation and distortion of language, ludlings have been used to support abstract underlying phonological representations, analyses of and theories about syllables and syllable structures, and phonological rule ordering (Davis 1994). A ludling such as *Verlan* that splits words and then reverses their constituent parts can show how speakers construct syllables in a particular language. Evidence from ludlings shows that speakers of different languages recognize syllables, but do not divide words into syllables in the same way. Ludlings seem to treat syllable-initial and -final consonants as single constituents. However, evidence from ludlings can also be ambiguous (Davis 1994). Speakers of Pig Latin, for example, show dialect differences in splitting *fume* into [jumfe] or [umfje] (Barlow 2001). Due to such ambiguous structures, ludlings can lend support for phonological theories, but not provide the foundation for them.

Most important for this paper, ludlings can give insight into the culture of their speakers. The goal of processes such as reversal is concealment, often to reinforce the speaker's identity with a group. Speakers use the rule structure of the standard language, but extend that structure or format with processes, such as reversal, that are not exploited in standard language. The speaker's goal is to produce a distinct and hard-to-recognize form (Sherzer 1976). Conklin (1959) documented the rules and processes of the speech disguise of the Hanunóo people of the Philippines, finding a variety of ludlings employing rearrangement, substitution, prefixation, suffixation, and inversion. He recorded in total twelve different ludlings, noting, "Linguistic

description alone cannot explain either the proliferation or the frequency [of the recorded ludlings], and hence one is led to ask with what nonlinguistic cultural features, if any, these practices are correlated” (Conklin 1959:633). The prominence and abundance of ludlings among the Hanunóo showed Conklin that their analysis can provide insight into the culture in which such ludlings are spoken.

Conklin then found that each ludling was used in a specific way by young men in their conversations with each other and their courting of young women in different circumstances and with different groups present for the conversation. He concludes, “In analyzing their initially recognized high correlation with courtship behavior it has now been possible to place these speech modifications within the context of the total culture, and to show how an apparently esoteric part of language description may help to define a major status differentiation within the wider social structure” (Conklin 1959:636). From an examination of *Verlan*, linguists can make similar discoveries about the practices of French speakers in the *banlieues* and throughout France.

1.2 Sociology of the French Language

In order to understand the place of *Verlan* in the French language and in French society, one must understand the place of language in French culture. For most French citizens, the purity of language carries more importance than in other cultures. Coveny (2001:2) writes: “The French language is at the very core of the French national identity: the fact that virtually all French people speak French every day (almost all of them native speakers) is just about the only characteristic that sets them apart from every other people, except for the francophone communities of Belgium, Switzerland and Canada.” Most French speakers recognize the primacy of what is known as *français standard*, Standard French, defined as the speech used by

the educated bourgeoisie of Paris and its environs (Valdman 1982). Standard French has its roots in the royal court of the *ancien régime*, where, for example, speakers did not pronounce final consonants retained in the orthography, pronounced *-ais* and *-ois* as [e] and [wa], and replaced a trilled [r] with the uvular [ʁ] (Ager 1990). Alongside Standard French exist *français soutenu*, Sustained French, a formal version of the language, and *français populaire*, Popular French, the form one might hear on the street spoken informally or by members of the underclass. Valdman (1982) shows that under linguistic examination, the notion of a truly standard form of French falls away; *le français standard* is just as much a construct as the other two forms of the language. Nevertheless, with institutions like the *Académie Française*, the national watchdog of the French language, and with a vigor ingrained into the populace at large, the majority of French speakers defend the propriety of their language against any attack, foreign or domestic. Ager (1990) writes, “In summary, therefore, perceived language attitudes can be said to be based on the belief that French achieved perfection in the eighteenth century, and that this perfection renders it a universal human possession worth defending, by centralised control, against change, against internal fragmentation or ‘creolisation,’ and against external attack, by unified, fierce defensive and offensive moves. The general public is thus said to be proud of the language, proud of owning it, and proud of its symbolic value” (Ager 1990:222).

For better or worse, language is a constantly changing entity. It defies prescriptivism and, for purists like the French, remains in constant need of correction and guidance. Changes in French, especially in the modern world, have created an attitude of linguistic crisis centering around three areas (Ager 1990). First, linguistic borrowings from outside the country in areas such as language, culture, science, technology, and lifestyle, bring changes to French itself. Such linguistic invasion is evident to any visitor to France; while spending a semester there in 2005, a

college student overheard a French girl tell her friend over the phone that something was incredible, “*c’était ohmygod.*” Second, social changes inside the country threaten the French language. Chiefly among these has been the recent influx of immigrants, especially from North African and Islamic countries. Other changes include the popularization of the vulgar language of younger generations and the “democratization” of education.

The third area of linguistic crisis directly connects to the primary area of cultural crisis in France. French linguistic insecurity is associated with the cultural insecurity of a nation concerned about its loss of importance in the world, as well as the effects of fragmentation inside and outside the country on territorial and cultural identity. This last concern finds its expression in opposition to regional languages and dialects in France, as well as a dislike of non-standard uses by native speakers from Africa and the Caribbean (Ager 1990). Against these changes stands “good French,” seen as part of the cultural patrimony as much as Versailles or Notre Dame de Chartres: “‘Maximal standard spoken French’ as used in semi-formal situations such as radio news broadcasts can be said to represent this possession and will be defended by ‘recourse to the Academy and to morals’ if any questions are posed on it or attacks made on it” (Ager 1990:239).

Outside Standard French exist the categories mentioned above, Sustained French and Popular French. The latter contains a body of language that Ball (1990) calls *le français branché* or *le parler branché*, literally “plugged-in French” or trendy French: “*le parler branché* is an amalgam of suburban slang, terminology from the drug, popular music, and fashion scenes, elements of sociological and psychoanalytic jargon, together with bits and pieces of media and publicity *français*. In actual conversation and writing, these various components are, so to speak, grafted on to a base of quite traditional grammar and lexis, which may be more or less

colloquial according to the circumstances” (Ball 1990:22). *Français branché* is primarily associated with speakers under twenty-five, has heterogeneous origins, and cuts across class boundaries. Through the media, the vocabulary has spread from the suburbs to middle-class teenagers in richer parts of the country, though some movement in the reverse direction is attested (Ball 1990).

Within *français branché*, we can analyze the linguistic behavior of the young people who create and use *Verlan*. As has been outlined above, the linguistic practices of the French intertwine with the cultural. While persons over forty direct their attention toward the home, young people are more inclined toward group-based and external leisure activities. This extroversion and their engagement with culture on a wider scale provide young speakers with an extensive vocabulary, keep them open to linguistic innovation, and provide material for the creation of slang and special languages relating to their interests (Ager 1990). By and large, their interests center around their emotional world and the culture around them, and less on political or ideological subjects. For adolescents in France, Ager (1990) reports that the “words that count” are family, work, love, travel, human rights, sports, money, music, and sexuality; the words that do not count: homeland, religion, army, politics, revolution, and unions.

From our study of the sociological aspects of the French language, we can gain insight into the importance of *Verlan*. In a land of fierce linguistic pride, where the language is guarded as a national treasure, a prime way to rebel against the nation, the *Académie* and the dominant culture would be to take the language and turn it around, to twist it outside the boundaries of accepted usage and then to popularize that distortion. Such is the nature of *Verlan* as it is practiced in the *banlieue*. *Verlan* exists as the most explicit form of linguistic rebellion in *français populaire*, garnering the admiration of some and the disdain of others. It provides young

people with a language of their own which they can use to conceal their language from established authorities, and one with which they can establish themselves socially by flouting the linguistic practices and social institutions of their authority figures.

1.3 Argot

The previous sections have established the basic information about ludic language, with the understanding that an analysis of ludlings can shed light onto the broader culture in which they occur. They have also examined the sociological importance of the French language. We must look at French *argot*, the body of slang of which *Verlan* is a part. Scholars categorize types of *argot* differently, though their schematics are not mutually exclusive. Rather, by examining the different taxonomies of *argot*, we can gain insight into the many roles that *argot* and *Verlan* play in French culture.

The first mention of *argot* appeared in 1628 and referred to petty thieves, *les argotiers*, whose name soon became applied to the language that their collective used. *Argot* has therefore always borne a connotation of crime and social taboo. François-Geiger (1991) distinguishes between three types of *argot*. First, *argot* refers to the cryptolect spoken by the thugs and gang members at the end of the nineteenth century. This cryptolect, now practically disappeared, was an amalgam of parlances from the suburbs, then called *faubourgs*, and the specialized jargons specific to different types of criminals. The second category comprises *les parlers branchés*, trendy languages, which have playful and identificational functions. These languages employ a coding system that allows them to conceal meaning from the uninitiated. The first and second categories of *argot* form the basis for the third, which serves as part of the foundation for *le français populaire*, popular French, the common parlance of the French urban underclass. This *argot* renews and enriches *français populaire*, providing it with a steady stream of new

vocabulary (Valdman 2000). *Verlan* falls primarily into the second category due to its primary cryptic function, but also into the third, since certain terms have slipped into popular and standard French.

Calvet (1991) organizes *argot* in a slightly different way. He cites de Mauro (1987:23), who defined what he terms the “multilingualism within a language” as comprised of diastratic (relative to social strata), diatopic (relative to places), and diachronic (relative to generations) forms of *argot*. Using this model, Calvet posits that certain contemporary forms of *Verlan* are mostly diachronic (forms for adolescents), certain forms of *argot* are diastratic, and other jargons come from diatopic variations, chiefly *le ‘jargon’ des coquillards*, founded on the dialects of Eastern France (Calvet 1991). While Calvet categorizes *Verlan* primarily as a diachronic form of *argot*, it occupies the other categories too. *Verlan* takes on different forms depending on the social milieu and the location in which it is spoken. Just as *Verlan* differentiates between adults and adolescents, it can also distinguish yuppies from street kids, and *banlieusards* from northern Paris from those from the western suburbs.

According to Goudailler (2001), *argot* has changed from being a body of slang among members of a professional class, butchers or fishmongers, for example, to a body of language that young people use. In order of importance, the professional *argots* serve cryptic, ludic, and identificational functions. Sociologic forms of *argot*, such as *Verlan*, serve instead primarily identificational functions, then cryptic and ludic.

Sourdou (1991) creates a slight variation of the categories above, listing three different types of *argot*. *Jargons* allow groups to speak more economically, specifically, and rigorously. Slang in this category chiefly comes from vocational groups, such as the aforementioned butchers, or the professional languages of doctors and lawyers. *Argots* are secretive languages

whose primary purpose is to prevent the non-initiated from understanding the speech exchanged. Encryption of this kind occurs to varying extents; by necessity, the *argot* of drug traffickers is more secretive than that of high-schoolers. *Jargonot* serves a primarily ludic function; it is a way of playing with words for fun and a way to identify with a particular group. *Verlan* falls into the latter two categories, serving as a sign of group identity and a ludling for members of that group (Sourdod 1991).

Though categorized differently by different scholars, an examination of the contemporary study of *argot* reveals the character of French slang and that of *Verlan*. As we shall examine in the section on the sociology of *Verlan*, it, like *argot*, serves as an identity marker and as a device for encryption. It also remains a way for children to manipulate language for their own pleasure and amusement. As *argot* is associated with the street, criminality, and social taboo, so *Verlan* has become the language of choice for petty crime and drug use. The study of *argot*, therefore, gives a larger linguistic context for the study of *Verlan* and provides an introduction into what the ludling signifies in French society.

1.4 Sociology of Verlan

To understand *Verlan's* roots and function, one must understand the background of its speakers and the cultural matrix in which it is produced. According to Lefkowitz (1989, 1991), outside of major French cities exists an area known as *la banlieue*, *la cité/téci*, or *la zone*, what Americans would refer to as the ghetto. These suburbs include *Montreuil*, *La Courneuve*, *Seine-Saint-Denis*, and *Gousainville*. Those who live in *la zone* often reside in enormous public housing projects, *les HLMs* [*habitations à loyer modéré*], and face unpromising economic prospects. Residents feel isolated from mainstream French culture and society. Many are immigrants from former French colonies in Northern Africa and elsewhere, as well as other

predominantly Muslim countries in Africa and Asia. Because of the societal isolation their families experience, second or third-generation immigrant children fit into neither their parents' culture nor the dominant French culture. They will speak neither their parents' language nor Standard French fluently; many in the Parisian *banlieues* have never seen Paris itself. Bachmann and Basier (1984) list four key factors that contribute to the sense of isolation in the *banlieues* and are also conducive to the formation of special languages:

- 1) Deindustrialization, which causes the job market to shrink.
- 2) A feeling of crisis about educational methods.
- 3) The degrading living quarters, such as the *HLMs*, in which many residents live.
- 4) The affirmation of a deviant youth culture, as seen in certain elements of rock culture.

In the face of the circumstances shown above, young residents of the *banlieue*, particularly the second-generation Arab immigrants known as *beurs* [bøʁ] (*beur* being *Verlan* for *arabe*), respond in four different ways (Laronde 1988). Some assimilate into French culture, deciding to be French "like everyone else." Often these young people are in the minority of successful students who wish to conform to societal norms and enter into the dominant culture. Other *beurs* react the opposite way, becoming fiercely anti-assimilationist. More adolescents, however, simply lack a concrete identity and adopt a *laisser-faire* attitude. The group on which this paper will focus, however, is the fourth: the adolescents who, lacking an identity of their own, actively create one through their cultural and linguistic practices. They adopt what they like of the cultures of their parents and their new home and use them to form one of their own. Contemporary *Verlan* originated as such a means of creating an identity separate from the two dominant cultures in the lives of *beur* adolescents.

The speakers of *Verlan* vary according to different parts of a French city. Overall, more males speak *Verlan* than females, and some girls view speaking *Verlan* as “speaking like a boy” (Méla, 1991). Often, the best speakers of *Verlan* are the worst students, in that they are the most deviant regarding scholastic and social rules (Lefkowitz 1991). *Verlan* is still spoken mostly where it originated, though it has spread to all parts of French society, including the now-deceased president François Mitterrand (Lefkowitz 1991). The game is most commonly used in schools, particularly middle schools; prisons, where it takes on its most complex and cryptic forms; military barracks, in the absence of superiors; public transportation, especially the *Métro*; the street, especially among young people not in school; and *la cité*, the ghetto both difficult to penetrate and to escape, an environment in which *Verlan* is a privileged language, especially related to drugs and petty theft (Lefkowitz 1991).

Depending on the speaker, *Verlan* fulfills different functions. French youth living outside the *banlieue* who want to appear *branché* use *Verlan* to identify with the downtrodden, in the same way that suburban, wealthy adolescents in the United States mimic the African-American vernacular of the poorer inner city. Some urban professionals and intellectuals will use *Verlan* as a signal of their awareness of social problems and trends in the *banlieue* (Lefkowitz 1991). Still, the greatest usage of *Verlan* occurs in the *cité* among young men, and that is where the focus of this paper will remain.

Verlan identifies its speakers not only as belonging to a particular group, but as contesting against the norms of French society. Lefkowitz (1991:61) notes that “Speaking backwards becomes a metaphor of opposition or talking back.” Goudaillier (2001:8) says that the form of identification becomes the expression of the evils experienced, “*le dire des maux*” [the speaking of evil]. The *fracture sociale* has created a *fracture linguistique*, which then serves to

reinforce the *fracture sociale* and mark speakers of *Verlan* as broken away from Standard French and its society. Speakers take the French language of their surroundings and mutate it to create a language of their own:

*Il ne leur reste plus alors qu'à faire usage d'une langue française qu'ils tordent dans tous les sens et dont ils modifient les mots en les coupant, les renversant; la déstructuration de la langue s'opère par introduction dans les énoncés de formes parasitaires, qui sont construites par divers procédés formels ou empruntées d'autres dialectes et langues. C'est un moyen pour ceux qui utilisent de telles formes linguistiques de s'approprier ainsi la langue française circulante, qui devient **leur** langue, celle qu'ils ont transformée, malaxée, façonnée à leur image, dirigée pour mieux la posséder, avant même de la dégurgiter, de l'utiliser après y avoir introduit leurs marques identitaires (Goudaillier 2001:9).²*

In addition to its identificational function, Bachmann and Basier (1984:172) list three other primary functions of *Verlan*:

- 1) Its ludic function is fundamental: the pleasure of the strangeness of words that are not learned by parents, the transgression of swear words and the joy of linguistic combination and exploration.
- 2) The initiative function gives young people the power usually reserved for those initiated into adult language and allows them to experiment with it.
- 3) As a corollary, the cryptic function of the game serves to protect speech from the careful ears of authority figures.

Lefkowitz (1991) adds a few more. She cites the factor of crudeness in *Verlan*, which permits the use of vulgar language with the intention of softening the vulgarity by disguising it. Students use *Verlan* "...to conceal, to better express themselves, to be accepted by peers, to be fashionably 'cool,' to be vulgar, to share a code with friends, to conform to the secret language of others, to speak about private, emotional, or sentimental subjects in a less transparent way, to disguise insults, and to be euphemistic about mockery and sensitive topics like racial relations, sex, drugs,

² Nothing remains for them to do, therefore, except to make use of a French language that they twist in all directions and whose words they modify by cutting and reversing them; the deconstruction of the language operates via introduction in the wordings of parasitic forms, which are created through different formal processes or borrowed from other dialects and languages. It is a way for those who use such linguistic forms to appropriate spoken French, which becomes **their** language, which they have transformed, kneaded, fashioned in their image, directed to better possess it, before spitting it back out, to use it after having introduced their marks of identification.

scatological issues etc” (Lefkowitz 1991:61-62). Outside the school, *Verlan* can become more cryptic as its function shifts from a means of identification to a secret language for concealing illegal activities, such as subway theft and drug dealing. Finally, as noted above, *Verlan* can also act as a way for the urban higher class to identify and sympathize with the downtrodden (Lefkowitz 1991:62).

As with any ludling or body of slang, a series of restrictions exist as to the appropriate places and topics in which and for which *Verlan* can be used. The analysis and discovery of such restrictions is the object of this paper, and therefore will be examined more extensively later on, but a general outline of the appropriate lexical contexts for the use of *Verlan* and the appropriate and inappropriate situations for using *Verlan* are presented here. Lefkowitz (1989:317) lists the most appropriate lexical contexts for *Verlan* as:

- 1) Slang and obscene items
- 2) Subjects related to leisure and passions
- 3) Topics about daily life
- 4) Subjects dealing with criticism
- 5) Topics related to controversial and taboo issues

Paul (1985:40-42) lists the situations in which *Verlan* is appropriate:

- 1) Game-like situations, usually requiring an audience of friends or siblings
- 2) Physically or verbally aggressive situations
- 3) Dangerous situations, including criminal activities, running from the law. In this setting *Verlan* is rapid and quite informative.
- 4) Daily situations in which the speaker desires to insert an element of humor and encryption.

By contrast, Lefkowitz (1991:70) identifies settings where *Verlan* would not be appropriate, including:

- 1) In public and/or formal settings, i.e. church, theater, classroom, the table, etc.
- 2) With authority figures or figures worthy of respect
- 3) With the non-initiated
- 4) For serious behavior, including job interviews, girl chasing, writing formally, and having sexual relations.

In order to understand the uses of *Verlan*, a scholar must find a way into the close-knit culture of the *banlieue* and record young people at ease amongst themselves in their natural environment. Such study is difficult for French scholars and nearly impossible for those in other countries. To give an idea of how *Verlan* is spoken, therefore, I will present an analysis of the French film *La Haine*, and then conclude the paper with an analysis of an interview with a young *beur* in the *banlieue* from Méla (1988).

In 1996, Matthieu Kassovitz directed *La Haine*, “Hate,” a film which gave a controversial and piercing look into life in a *banlieue* outside Paris. The film depicts a day in the life of three friends, an Arab, a Jew, and a black man, whose names are the same as the actors who played them. Linguistically, the film provided many in France and abroad with a first-hand look at French as it is spoken in the *banlieue*, prompting the surprise of many when they found they could not understand the language spoken there. One of the main reasons for such linguistic incomprehension was the use of *Verlan* by characters in the film. An examination of their usage of *Verlan* reinforces the findings of other scholars. The characters speak *Verlan* only amongst themselves, never to adults inside or outside the *banlieue*. They employ the vocabulary of *Verlan* as they would other slang terms. They use *Verlan* for drug vocabulary and employ many of the better-known terms: *keuf*, from *flic*, “cop, pig,” *meuf*, from *femme*, “woman, girl,” *téci*, from *cité*, “ghetto.” They also use *Verlan* for emotions, such as *vééné*, from *énervé* “annoyed,” and *goleri*, from *rigoler* “to laugh.” In their heaviest moments of *Verlan* usage, the characters still use only one *Verlan* word per sentence, and it will be the most important one. From *La Haine*, we can see a microcosm of *Verlan* usage and note especially its frequency and similarity to the larger corpus of *argot*.

The final presentation of this section will examine an interview with a speaker of *Verlan* in Méla (1988). The interview was conducted with a thirteen-year-old French student, Saïd, from the *cit * of *Clos Saint Lazare*, outside Paris. Saïd was characterized by his interviewer as being one of the more socially deviant students of his class, and therefore, as cited above, a likely candidate to be one of the better speakers of *Verlan* for his age group. In the interview, Saïd clearly seeks to impress both the female researcher who has expressed interest in the language he speaks and the male interviewer. Because the interviewer, Claude, is also of immigrant descent and grew up in the same *banlieue*, Saïd recognizes him as a “brother,” but is not used to speaking with him directly about *Verlan* because Claude is also a student monitor or proctor in his school. During the course of the interview, Saïd uses 58 terms in *Verlan*: 18 verbs, 35 substantives, of which 11 refer to animate beings, 6 adjectives, 1 pronoun, and 6 multiple-word combinations, such as *comme  a*, *tout seul* etc. His lexical field covers primarily human relations, drugs, and theft. Most terms he verlanizes appear normally at least once as well, however, a certain number of words do not alternate with their French roots, especially terms for human beings (*keuf*, *reum*, etc.), and the core vocabulary associated with theft. Indeed, it becomes clear that *Verlan* is the natural language for discourse about theft: during the moments when Saïd loses self-consciousness and is immersed in the structure of his story, his use of *Verlan* is the most frequent. By contrast, clarifications for Claude and other breaks in his narrative lead to a flow of French alone.

From our examination of *Verlan* and its sociological aspects, we see a body of language designed to empower those who speak it. *Verlan* gives its users a marker of group identification, a system for initiation into that group, a means of rebellion against authority, a game for playing with sounds, a way to discuss sensitive subjects more easily, and a way to hide their speech from

the ears of adult and otherwise uninitiated society. As a mirror for the culture of *beur* adolescents, *Verlan* shows a group of primarily young men using language as a way to create a place for themselves between two societies to which they feel allegiance, yet do not claim fully as their own.

1.5 Syntax, Morphology, and Semantics of *Verlan*

Verlan provides a body of vocabulary to be used with standard French syntax without making any changes to the structure of a sentence. However, as Lefkowitz (1991) shows, speakers verlanize some common phrases, showing the relationship between syntax and phonology:

vas-y [vazi] > [ziva] “go ahead”
 [zi.av]

par terre [par tɛr] > [tɛrpar] “on the ground”

tant pis [tã pi] > [pitã] “too bad”³

From these examples and others in the corpus, we can see that phonological rules apply on a syntactic level and that syntax provides further support for adopting a nonlinear CV approach in the analysis of *Verlan*, as will be discussed in the section on the phonology of *Verlan* below (Lefkowitz 1991:106-107).

The first morphological note scholars make is that not all words can undergo *Verlan*. Though different studies in different areas and times have produced differing results, some common ground exists. By and large, nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs can always be verlanized. Articles, prepositions, object pronouns, and the negative particle *pas* are typically not affected. The transformation of subject pronouns, possessive pronouns, and demonstrative adjectives varies depending on the speaker (Lefkowitz 1991). The substantivization of adjectives

³ I correct Lefkowitz’s transcription for *tant* from [ta] to [tã].

and verbs occurs regularly, a tendency most regularly seen in children, the primary group of *Verlan* speakers. *Verlan* also does not mark adjectives for gender, mirroring a trend toward simplification in Popular French. It also does not inflect its verbs, most probably to avoid excessive obscurity in transformations (Lefkowitz 1991:112).

On a semantic level, Paul (1985) finds complete, partial and null homonyms in *Verlan*, showing that *Verlan* is a variety of French and not a separate language. Some words, specifically racial and ethnic terms, become less objectionable when transformed in *Verlan*, as outlined above. Since the Standard French terms already carry emotional and negative connotations, *Verlan* provides new terms for groups that do not carry the baggage of the old words. In addition, racism is a taboo in the population at large, and therefore more easily discussed indirectly with the disguised terms of *Verlan* than with Standard French (Lefkowitz 1991).

For the most part, however, *Verlan* words become more charged than their counterparts in Standard French. For example, *chécou*, from *coucher* “lie prone,” means a more passionate, bestial and vulgar sex, and implies no emotional feelings during the act. *Keuf* “cop” is considered more aggressive, hateful, and vulgar than its root *flic*. Its homophony with the English *fuck* is not coincidental, and indeed Lefkowitz (1991) renders the *Verlan* form of *fuck* as *keuf* as well. *Relou* for *lourd* “dense” and *deum* for *merde* “shit” are both said to be more aggressive in their *Verlan* forms. While most *Verlan* forms are seen as more negative in intensity, at least one term did not take on a negative connotation in *Verlan*: *chébran* is described as being more *chébran* than *branché* (Lefkowitz 1991).

1.6 The Phonology of *Verlan*

The focus of most linguistic work on *Verlan* has been creating a theory that can account for the various transformative processes that occur in the game. Bagemihl (1989) argues that

reversal ludlings operate by a marked setting permitting the crossing of association lines, a solution many linguists have found unsatisfactory with very few exceptions. Bachmann and Basier (1984) note the internal processes that I hope to explore in this paper, namely the need for *Verlan* to “sound good.” They cite multiple mechanisms at work and give a cursory account of the basic transformations taking place. Azra and Cheneau (1994) present the transformations of *Verlan* with a basic analysis, ultimately concluding that the speaker does not have an algorithm with which to create any number of words in *Verlan*. Rather, he memorizes some *Verlan* words and figures the rest out as he hears it spoken and speaks it himself. However, if *Verlan* exhibits any regularity—and it does, despite its exceptions—a speaker will use an algorithm to create new forms based on what he hears.⁴ Méla (1988, 1991, 1997) gives good accounts of the processes in *Verlan* and even their change over time in certain aspects; however, I did not find her helpful in looking for a comprehensive theory involving formal phonological structures.

Antoine (1998) gives a complete presentation and analysis of *Verlan*. He too notes that the spontaneity of the ludling makes it difficult to find a set linguistic principle to govern it, especially when the same word may not be consistently verlanized throughout a dialogue. He argues that *Verlan* is a process of formation that depends on cutting words to transform them into two blocks, which are then reversed. The first block ends after the first vocalic sound; the second constitutes the rest of the word (Antoine 1998:61). Antoine’s theory appeals on the grounds that it is so simple that it can cover many forms of *Verlan* with ease; however, like Méla’s, it does not address the activity of transformations in *Verlan* at a formal phonological level. The two scholars whom I have found most helpful in this regard are Lefkowitz (1989, 1991) and Plénat (1995). I shall outline their theories of the processes behind *Verlan* in this section and show the advantages and disadvantages of each.

⁴ The pilot experiment in this paper further validates this statement.

Lefkowitz outlines her theories in her 1989 paper, then fleshes them out in her 1989 work with Weinberger, and presents them in greatest detail in her 1991 book. The basic rules for *Verlan* usage are best understood in the categories of disyllabic words, open and closed monosyllabic words, and polysyllabic words. Disyllabic words represent the simplest case of *Verlan* and act as a simple inversion of syllables (Lefkowitz 1989:314-315).

Open Syllable $[(CV)_1 (CV)_2 > (CV)_2 (CV)_1]$

- (1) a) branché [bʁɑ̃ʃe] > [ʃebʁɑ̃]
 b) moto [moto] > [tomo]
 c) pourri [pʁi] > [ʁipu]
 d) tomber [tɔ̃be] > [betɔ̃]

Closed Syllable $[(CV)_1 (CVC)_2 > (CVC)_2 (CV)_1]$

- (1) e) bonjour [bɔ̃ʒuʁ] > [ʒuʁbɔ̃]
 f) l'envers [lɑ̃vɛʁ] > [vɛʁlɑ̃]
 g) musique [myzik] > [zikmy]
 h) voiture [vwatyʁ] > [tyʁvwɑ]

With monosyllabic words, the *Verlan* process will differ for open or closed monosyllables. Open monosyllables are simply read backwards, as shown in (2a-c) below (Lefkowitz, 1989:315).

Open Monosyllable CV $[CV > VC]$

- (2) a) pu [py] > [yp]
 b) ça [sa] > [as]
 c) fou [fu] > [uf]

The process for closed monosyllables involves a series of rules, outlined below and followed by examples (Lefkowitz 1989:315-316). Note that unlike other *Verlan* processes, the transformation of closed monosyllables renders a *Verlan* form from which the original Standard French form cannot be retrieved by simple reversal.

Underlying representation:

/mɛk/

Schwa epenthesis: $C_1V_1C_2 > (CV)_1(CV)_2$, where $V_2 = /ə/$

[mɛkə]

Syllable metathesis: $(CV)_1(CV)_2 > (CV)_2(CV)_1$

[kəmɛ]

Final Vowel Deletion: $(CV)_1(CV)_2 > C_2V_2C_1$

[kəm]

Phonetic realization:

[køm]

- (3) a) bus [bys] > [bysə] > [səby] > [səb] > [søb]
 b) sac [sak] > [sakə] > [kəsə] > [kəs] > [køs]
 c) cher [ʃɛʁ] > [ʃɛʁə] > [ʁəʃɛ] > [ʁəʃ] > [ʁøʃ]
 d) flic [flik] > [flikə] > [kəfli] > [kəf] > [køf]

The rules for the transformation of polysyllables are less codified than those for di- or monosyllables, producing conflicting results:

- (4) a) défoncé [defɔ̃se] > [fɔ̃sede] ~ [sefɔ̃de]
 b) cigarette [sigəʁɛt] > [ʁɛtgasi] ~ [gəʁɛtsi] ~ [ʁɛtsiga]
 c) vérité [veʁite] > [teveʁe] ~ [teviʁe]
 d) enculer [ãkyle] > [ãleky] ~ [leky.ã]

Sometimes Standard French words are truncated to create a disyllabic base from which a word in *Verlan* can be formed (Lefkowitz 1989:316-317).

- (4) g) porte-monnaie > portné [pɔʁtne] > [nepɔʁ]

Other polysyllabic words are broken into groups of syllables, and then each group is analyzed as a disyllabic word (Weinberger and Lefkowitz 1989:39).

- (5) appartement [apɑʁtəmã] > [təmã.apɑʁ]

Weinberger and Lefkowitz (1989) go on to give a detailed account of *Verlan* as the metathesis of the first branching node above the constituent in the syllabic structure of the word. The final process is shown below in Figure 1.

	w σ ^ CVC /mEk/	w σ ^ CV /vy/	w ^ σ σ ^ ^ CVCV /moto/	w σ ^ CCVC /prof/
σ copy				
epenth.	CVCV mEkə	—	—	CCVCV p r o f ə
resyll.	σ σ ^ ^ CVCV mEkə	—	—	σ σ ^ ^ CCVCV p r o f ə
FBM	kəmE	yv	tomo	fəpro
hookup	σ ^ CVCV kəmE	σ ^ VC yv	σ σ ^ ^ CVCV t o m o	σ σ ^ ^ CVCCV f ə p r o
deletion	kəm	—	—	—

Figure 1. First Branch Metathesis

With this mechanism of first branch metathesis, Lefkowitz attempts to account for *Verlan*'s transformation, and does so successfully for most of its forms.

Plénat (1995) offers an alternative theory that accounts for all forms of *Verlan* and the diversity of the results with one process. He argues that speakers create *Verlan* by associating the melodic sequence of the original form with a new template, beginning with some element in the sequence. This sequence is scanned from left to right up to its right edge, then, always left to right, scanning from the left edge until the template is saturated. For example, we can look at the transformation *buffon* [bufɔ̃] > [fɔ̃bu]. In Standard French, the [b] is associated with the first consonant of a CVCV template. In order to disguise the word, therefore, while maintaining the integrity of the CVCV template, the speaker must place [f] at C₁ and [ɔ̃] at V₁. The speaker then

scans [bufõ] from left to right to fill up the remaining CV slots on the template, rendering [fõbu] as the result (Plénat 1995:109):

(6) a) b u f õ	b) b u f õ	c) b u f õ	b u f õ	d) f õ b u
CVCV	CVCV	CV	C V	CVCV

To ensure that the proper transformations take place, Plénat adds two immediate restrictions. First, the *Verlan* form must retain as much of the original melody as can fit in the template. Second, he reinforces the crossing constraint, noting that speakers must respect the order of the melodic elements.

Plénat notes three advantages of his templatic model of *Verlan*. First, a single mechanism explains monosyllabic, disyllabic, and polysyllabic *Verlan*. The system does not work as well for open monosyllables, however, because it requires a reversal of the prosodic template. Still, if one accepts that for such monosyllables to be disguised, the form CV must become VC, Plénat's explanation becomes more acceptable. The simple method of beginning somewhere along the melody and reattaching the prosodic template explains the diversity of *Verlan* forms for polysyllabic words: the diversity of results depends not on diverse mechanisms, but on the length of a word. *Verlan* forms of the mono- and polysyllabic words *fou*, *vérité*, and *corrida* are given as follows (Plénat 1995:110):

(7) a) f u	b) v e r i t e	c) k o r i d a	k o r i d a
V C	CV CVCV	CVCV CV	CVCV CV

The second advantage of the templatic model is that it easily explains the epenthesis of schwa in closed monosyllabic forms of *Verlan*. A closed monosyllable, with template CVC, begins encoding at the left edge of the word and ends at the right edge. The two constraints given

above thus come in conflict: one restriction says that the prosodic template must be filled by elements from the melody, while the no-crossing constraint prohibits crossing lines of association to use the vowel from the melody. The no crossing constraint prevails, and the prosodic template is filled with the addition of a schwa, as in the transformation *chatte* [ʃat] > [tøʃ]. However, on a few occasions, the weaker restriction can win out, as in the example of *vieille* [vjɛj] > [jɛv] (Plénat 1995:111). The moraic constraint can also be violated in the production of *Verlan* forms. In the verlanization of open monosyllables, for example, [vy] must become [yv] in order to follow the rules of *Verlan* and to remain a minimal word in French, however it will violate the moraic constraint in the process (Plénat 1995:116).⁵



Certainly there are exceptions to the system and examples that require further explanation, but the broad outline of Plénat's theory is shown above. Plénat asserts further constraints: the new prosodic template must constitute a minimal word, comprise the same number of moras as the original word, and place the consonants of the original word in the same syllabic positions they formerly occupied—i.e., an onset will map onto an onset position in the template and a coda, a coda (Plénat 1995:120, 124).

1.7 *Veul*

What happens when a word in *Verlan* enters the regular French lexicon, when the cryptic value has worn off from overuse? Scholars agree that a process of further reversal occurs and

⁵ Plénat alone incorporates moras into his work on *Verlan*. I am of the opinion that the moraic constraint may exist, but that it is easily dominated by other constraints. However, a more thorough analysis of moras in *Verlan* is outside the scope of this paper.

that it is less systematic than *Verlan*, but disagree as to what that looks like or what to call it. Lefkowitz (1989:319-320) refers to the process as *reverlanization*, giving three examples of the process:

(9) a) arabe [aʁabə] > [bə.ʁa] > [bə.ʁ] = [bøʁ] > [bøʁə] > [ʁəbø] > [ʁəb] = [ʁøb]

b) femme [fam] > [famə] > [məfa] > [məf] = [møf] > [møfə] > [fəmø] = [fømø]

c) flic [flikə] > [kəfli] > [kəfl] > [kəf] = [køf] > [køfə] > [fəkø] > [fək] = [føk]⁶

As has been noted above, verlanized words take on a different connotation than the words from which they were derived. Lefkowitz (1989) notes that this is especially true of words that have undergone reverlanization. In examples (9b) and (9c), the reverlanized terms are even more negative than their already negative counterparts in *Verlan*; though it has already been noted that *keuf* is similar to the English *fuck*, [føk] bears an even stronger resemblance.

Méla (1991:84) agrees that a process of re-reversal occurs when some words become overused, but restricts the process to closed monosyllables that were the result of truncation:

(10) a) [køf] > [føkø]

b) [bøʁ] > [ʁøbø]

c) [møf] > [fømø]

d) [føʒ] > [ʒøf] and sometimes by truncation [ʒøf]

Since reverlanization, as Méla also calls it, replaces other vowels with [ə] and [ø], the rule can only apply a limited number of times. She notes that the larger the diffusion of *Verlan*, the more the mechanism for encryption will run wild. Sometimes secondary inversions appear that affect

⁶ Lefkowitz and Méla, like many phonologists examining *Verlan*, render [ø] on occasion as [œ] in their phonetic transcriptions. While this may be acceptable practice for French linguistics, its usage complicates IPA transcriptions for readers unfamiliar with French linguistics, and I have therefore chosen to use the more common [ø].

one syllable inside a word that has already been verlanized, [matʁak] > [tʁakma] > [tʁakam], or a mixture of systems that, for example, can render an expression like *comme ça* [asmok]. With transformations such as these, reverlanization permits its creators to renew their lexicon without departing from the framework of *Verlan* and to distance themselves from those who simply imitate them, demonstrating the creativity that makes *Verlan* such a successful process.

Calvet (1996) records a name that has arisen for this process of reverlanization, that of *Veul*. Born in the southern suburbs of Paris (Châtillon, Vitry), *Veul* inverts the elements in the second syllable of a word in *Verlan*. Transformations like [ʃope] > [peʃo] > [pe.oʃ] would lend themselves to the rule $C_1V_1C_2V_2 > C_1V_1V_2C_2$. However, it appears that no single rule governs *Veul*. As shown above [komsa] becomes [asmok], and in addition, [salou] > [lous], [luk] > [kəlu] > [kəl]. The question for Calvet becomes not how *Veul* works, but why it is used, especially since, unlike every other transformative process in French slang, it appears to have no guiding rule that he can discern. He claims that young speakers of *Verlan* simply want constant change in their language, that they reverse the game they already reversed and give it the name *Veul*.

Antoine (1998) criticizes Calvet's grouping of many disparate transformations into *Veul* and provides an alternative mechanism for the $C_1V_1C_2V_2 > C_1V_1V_2C_2$ transformation, namely a modification of that for *Verlan*. Just as the speaker breaks a French word into two blocks, then reverses them to create *Verlan*, a speaker wishing to put words into *Veul* breaks the word so that the second block begins to the right of the first vocalic sound, reverses the second block, and truncates the ending. Taking into account the addition of epenthetic schwas, the expected results then appear: *chopé* [ʃope] > [peʃo] > [pe.oʃ], *j'arrive* [ʒaʁiv] > [ʒavəʁi] > [ʒavəʁ], etc. Antoine

also gives a hypothesis for the transformation of *Verlan* into *Veul*, based on the truncated form of *Verlan*, *verl*: [vɛɾl] > [lɔvɛɾ] > [lɔv] > [vɔlə] > [vəl].

Overall, the study of *Veul* and *Veul* itself has evolved over time, and, more importantly, has highlighted the desire for continuous change and encryption on the part of *Verlan* speakers. It is significant to note that the process after *Verlan* would be harder to codify with a specific rule and that even then, the rule would mask the original word more than *Verlan*.

1.8 Ludlings Similar to *Verlan*

Verlan and *argot* are not the only ludlings or bodies of slang to function as they do in the society in which they are spoken. In this section, I will present a brief look at *Lunfardo*, a body of Argentine Spanish slang, and *vesre*, from the Spanish *reves*, a reversal ludling used in *Lunfardo*. I will also present *Smoi*, a ludling used in a small community in Finland. *Lunfardo* began as a phenomenon of immigration, a cross between immigrant Italian and native Spanish in Buenos Aires between 1870 and 1910, and it mirrors *argot* with respect to its foreign loan words. Also like *argot*, *lunfardo* and *vesre* are linked to crime. The music and dance of tango popularized *lunfardo* and *vesre*, which then filtered into the common parlance. Today *vesre* is primarily associated with cab drivers, but also used by various segments of the population (Martinez, personal communication, fall 2006). <http://www.coleccionesbuenosaires.com> counts 15 different types of *vesre* transformation, and the language is not as uniform or codified as *Verlan*. The most common *vesre* terms are nouns and verbs, such as *garpar* from *pagar* “to pay” and *lompas* from *pantalones* “pants.” Luciano Martinez, an Argentine professor of Spanish literature at Swarthmore College, reports that though it has a ludic component for speakers, he would not call it a game that speakers play (personal communication, fall 2006).

Jahr (2003) writes of *Smoi*, a Norwegian language game played by adults in Mandal, a town of 3,000-4,000 close to the southern tip of Norway. The term *smoi* comes from the Norwegian word *smug*, “narrow street” in the Mandal dialect. To speak *smoi* is *kepre nåss*, “to speak like this.” Jahr gives the overall transformation principle as “split the Mandal dialect word into syllables and/or phonemes, then rearrange the sequence of syllables or phonemes in any order you like, provided it is pronounceable. The resulting word does not have to be in accordance with normal Norwegian phonotactic rules” (Jahr 2003: 276). *Smoi* differs from most language games like *Verlan* in that it is first developed by adults, and then spread by adults and adolescents. In addition, Jahr notes, “even if we ascertain certain specific word formation tendencies or perhaps rules, it is not possible to predict the ‘correct’ form of a *Smoi* word. Each word seems to have been coined separately, some according to one rule, others by different rules” (Jahr 2003:276). From this single principle alone, it is clear that *Smoi* will be less productive than *Verlan*, less a matter of knowing a mechanism for creating vocabulary than a matter of knowing what that vocabulary is.

Smoi uses rearrangement, insertion, and deletion to effect linguistic transformation. Because such mechanisms do not occur productively, *Smoi* must be learned word by word; however, we can examine some typical output words. With rearrangement, [kom] > [mok] “come” and [krem] > [mekr] “cream.” With rearrangement and insertion, [bankən] > [kənbank] “bank + [en],” [makrəl] > [malekr], and [sjokolade] > [kosjodalle]. Insertion renders [fiske] > skifske], “to fish,” and deletion produces [tysker] > [skerr], “German.” Similar to *Veul*, *Smoi* has a more advanced form involving the double application of the encrypting mechanism, in this case rearrangement. In standard *Smoi*, [faren] > [raffen], which in expert *Smoi* then becomes

[fɛnraff] (Jahr 2003:283-285). Though they do not follow productive rules like *Verlan*, the processes of *Smoi* produce words that serve as social markers and means of encryption like those of *Verlan*.

A look at the sociolinguistics of *Smoi* shows its striking similarity to *Verlan*. In all Norwegian cities and towns, Jahr (2003) writes, upper-middle- and working-class sociolinguistic varieties of Norwegian exist. Because of Mandal's small size, such differences became more salient. *Smoi* is derived from the working-class dialect and developed in part as a way of speaking that dialect without negative social connotations. Men and boys across class lines could use it in a neutral way. Jahr reports that there are very few female speakers of *Smoi* and that the language is probably associated with male values. *Smoi* originated locally with fishmongers and other traders in the local marketplace before or during World War I. From there, it progressed to taxi drivers (note the similarity with *vesre*) in the 1920s and 1930s, then to employees in banks (Jahr 2003). During World War II, residents of Mandal used *Smoi* to fool their German occupiers. The language went into decline after the war, but regained popularity in the 1990s. One of *Smoi*'s key benefits is its exclusivity, especially since it uses no productive, and therefore learnable, mechanisms. When sports clubs play away, they enjoy using *Smoi* to exclude other Norwegian speakers. Similar to French conversations that employ *Verlan*, long conversations with *Smoi* can sound like a separate language. Also similarly to *Verlan*, *Smoi* is not used in the home, but is associated primarily with the street (Jahr 2003).

Though *Smoi* lacks the rules of *Verlan*, their processes of generating words are similar: "If someone coined a new word in *Smoi*, this word might catch on and spread to other users if they liked it and approved of its form—or they might try to suggest a competing form based on the same original word in the Mandal dialect" (Jahr 2003:280). Such localized linguistic

generation causes different groups of speakers to have different *Smoi* words for the same thing. Remarkably, such diversity does not exist to the same extent in *Verlan*, even though its linguistic unity has allowed it to spread across classes and regions. Different groups of *Verlan* speakers will employ different terms, but *reum*, *teush*, and *ça comme* retain their meaning across the *banlieue*. However, different groups of speakers may choose between forms of *Verlan* that obey the rules of transformation which word they will use. The focus of this paper will be on what restrictions cause this to be so. I examine why one particular form of *Verlan* is used over another, why *blesipo* is not *possible*.

2.0 Analysis of Literature and Corpora

The goal of this paper is to determine whether there are any underlying patterns of restrictions lingering around the edges of *Verlan*. A review of the most relevant papers for observations on such restrictions and exceptions precedes an analysis of four corpora of *Verlan* terms from 1991 to 2001. The analysis examines outstanding exceptions to the standard rules of *Verlan*, along with any sub-rules or mechanisms at work behind them. The analysis concludes that Plénat and Lefkowitz's rules cannot explain the full variety of *Verlan* by themselves. While they were effective for most *Verlan* in the past, the game is becoming more complex over time; now, finding the "correct" form depends on the practices and tastes of the group in which *Verlan* is spoken more than it used to.

The most salient difference between the theoretical mechanisms of transformation and the actual output forms of *Verlan* occurs with polysyllabic words. Bachmann and Basier (1984:174) note the many different pronunciations of the *Verlan* form of *cigarettes*: [gækɛtsi], [ɛtsiga] etc. Antoine (1998:59-60) and Méla (1988:52-53) give examples of *Verlan* versions of trisyllabic source words that do not follow any rule discussed in the literature:

- | | |
|---------------------------------------|--|
| (11) a) calibre [kalibɛə] > [bɛølika] | b) portugais [pɔʁtyge] > [getypɔʁ] |
| c) partouze [paʁtuʒə] > [zøtupaʁ] | d) carbure [kaʁbyɛə] > [ɛøbykaʁ] |
| e) frangine [fʁɑ̃ʒinə] > [nøʒifɛã] | f) possible [pɔsiblə] > [bløsipɔ] ⁷ |

Along with some of these forms, more conventional transformations exist as well. [libɛøka] is attested along with [bɛølika], [tuzøpaʁ] with [zøtupaʁ], [ʒinɛfɛã] with [nøʒifɛã], and [sibpɔ] with [bløsipɔ]. *Blesipo* was used in commercials for the *SNCF*, the national train service, although Méla (1991:82) writes that many speakers deemed *blesipo* incorrect as a variant of [sibpɔ]. Other examples of inversions like this were found in advertisements and brand names. The *Jacardi* brand became *Dicaja*. Antoine (1998:60) and Méla (1988:54) disagree on the transformation of the name *Cagivo*, the former rendering *Vogica* and the latter *Gicavo*, which seems so unconventional as to be an error or a possible form that would be unemployed in the usual circles of *Verlan*. Méla (1988:53) finds no explanation for these forms, particularly for *brélica*. On one hand, [libɛka] would produce three consonants, which is an impossible cluster in French; on the other hand, *Verlan* permits impossible clusters and consonants in other cases, including initial [p], [kt], [ʃt], [ft], and [ks] (Méla 1991:85).

Plénat (1995:106) lists two examples of disyllabic words in which an unaccented schwa is conserved before another vowel in a *Verlan* form: *herbe* [ɛʁbø] > [bøɛʁ] and *honte* [ɔ̃tø] > [tøɔ̃]. These forms resemble many of the trisyllables above in which a schwa in a coda that a speaker might or might not pronounce is realized in *Verlan*. He also lists three types of words

⁷ The pronunciation of the *e muet*, the [ə] present in French orthography but not usually pronounced in spoken Standard French, is realized here, as in Méla's transcriptions.

that fall outside the standard forms of *Verlan* (1995:107). First, there are closed monosyllables that do not verlanize with schwa epenthesis and truncation.

- (12) a) *comme* [kɔm] > [mɔk]
 b) *muscle* [myskl] > [sklym]
 c) *noiche* [nwaʃ] > [ʃwan]
 d) *sexe* [sɛks] > [ksɛs]
 e) *vieille* [vjɛj] > [jɛv]

Second, we find forms, often alternatives to other *Verlan* terms where a vowel or consonant redoubles:

- (13) a) *vieille* [vjɛj] > [jɛvjɛ]
 b) *bus* [bys] > [zbɔb]
 c) *dehors* [de.ɔʁ] > [ʁɔʁɔdɔ]
 d) *énervé* [enɛʁve] > [venɛʁv]
 e) *n'importe quoi* [nɛʁɔʁtkwa] > [nɛʁɔʁtnawak]

Third, liquids in codas can move in unexpected ways: *film* [film] does not become [møfil] as one might expect, but [mølf]. Instead of [silfidi] or [silfid] for *difficile* [difisil], [sifildi] and [sifild] are the result. In these examples, the liquid has left one coda for the onset or another coda, though one cannot account for *merde* [mɛʁd] > [dɛʁm] instead of the expected [dømɛʁ]. Finally, onset consonants can migrate on rare occasions too, either from one syllable to another, *assurer* [asyre] > [syera] or *Joachim* [ʒɔ.akim] > [kimɔ.aʒ] instead of [kimʒɔ.a], which is also found. Consonants can also move from one position to another in the same syllable, as in the alternate form for *matraque* [matʁak] > [tʁakam] instead of the predicted [tʁakma], which is also found.

Some *Verlan* words that follow the rules of transformation, yet sound different from their Standard French roots, are affected by the spelling of the Standard French word (Méla 1997:25). *Cul* [ky], verlanized as [yk], has a variant [lyk]. *Con* [kɔ̃] renders [ðk] and [nok]. Some words

are always verlanized as they are written, even if this requires a shift in vowels or schwa epenthesis: *nez* [ne] becomes [zɛn] and *coup* [pøku]. Orthographic pronunciation occurs in the verlanized phrase *à fond* [afɔ̃] > [adɔ̃f] as well (Goudailler 2001).

The only semantic constraints of interest found in *Verlan* come from Bachmann and Basier (1984:180), who note that certain words pertaining to music are verlanized, but others are not. Specifically, one would hear [zikmy] for *musique* or [setka] for *cassette*, but genres of music, like *le reggae*, *le dub*, *le hard*, or *le funky* would not appear in *Verlan*. I find no explanation for this other than the particular idiosyncrasies of speakers.

Scholars explain these exceptions and others like them in various ways. Méla (1988:82) notes that *Verlan*'s spread throughout France has led to different pronunciations of root words, which in turn leads to different forms of *Verlan*. Lefkowitz (1991:63) also notes that variations and dialects exist within *Verlan* itself between *banlieues* and different social groups in those regions and throughout France.⁸ When these dialects come in conflict with each other, the one closer to Standard French prevails. *Verlan* also changes over time. In addition, Méla (1991:84) reports that the inventory of words that are truncated can change, and later (1997:25) adds that groups of speakers decide which words will be truncated, causing everyone to conform to the group. Such decisions will change over time, with words that used to be truncated regaining their final phonemes and those which were always whole being pared down.

The need “to sound good,” as noted by speakers, reinforces and diminishes certain forms in other ways as well. Méla notes (1997:25) that the reverlanization [føkø], though perfectly legitimate *Veul*, has not had much success; [køf] remains the term of choice in Paris, and the old *argot* term *schmitt* is used in the *banlieue*. An analysis of *La Haine* confirms that [føkø] is not

⁸ Vaux and Nevin (personal communication) note the same types of dialects in American Pig Latin.

used, while [køf] and *schmitt* are the words of choice in the *banlieue*. Such practices reinforce the need for group acceptance to make a potential form of *Verlan* thrive, to give it true legitimacy. Méla (1988:54) records a speaker who could verlanize *facteur* [faktøʁ] into [ktøʁfa], the predicted form, but insisted forcefully that it was not real *Verlan*.⁹

To better examine *Verlan*'s boundaries, I analyzed the corpora from Lefkowitz (1991), Plénat (1992),¹⁰ Zerling (1999), and Goudailler (2001) to find exceptional forms and to determine principles behind the exceptions. Overall, the later corpora, especially Goudailler (2001), showed *Verlan* with more idiosyncrasies than the earlier corpora. In Lefkowitz (1991), the only outstanding exceptions to the rules of *Verlan* are two multi-word phrases that become verlanized: *celui-là* [selqila] > [lasqi] and *n'importe quoi* [nẽpøʁtkwa] > [pøʁtnawak] ~ [nẽpøʁtnawak]. Ten years later, *Verlan* has diversified and complexified; many more exceptions to the rules appear, as do borrowings from English, Arabic, and other foreign languages. Rules have become more like guidelines; instead of fixed mechanisms a speaker must use to transform a word, there are a few essential rules and many options to further disguise the word. Schwas can be epenthesized, or, in trisyllabic words, they can be deleted to make the final *Verlan* form disyllabic; final consonants and syllables can be truncated or let remain. The choice as to whether and how these rules apply rests squarely on the taste of the speaker.

3.0 Pilot Experiment

In order to view firsthand the mechanisms of *Verlan* and their use by a native French speaker, I performed an experiment with two speakers living and studying in the United States. I

⁹ Linguists would note that this example is not real *Verlan* as well because it ungrammatically parses the syllables of [faktøʁ] to [ktøʁfa], depriving the final syllable of a coda and creating an impossible consonant cluster as an onset. The correct *Verlan* form for [faktøʁ], according to the model, would be [tøʁfak].

¹⁰ Plénat (1992) is itself an amalgam of corpora from Bachmann and Basier (1984), Lefkowitz (1991), Méla (1989 and 1991), Paul (1985), Bensimon-Choukroun (1988), Villoing (1992), and the author's original data.

sought to determine whether a native speaker with little or no knowledge of *Verlan* could learn and correctly speak it. The methods and data of the experiment are recorded in the appendix to this paper. This section of the paper analyzes the results obtained. Speakers were given four words in Standard French, along with their forms in *Verlan*. They were then given four more words in Standard French and asked to put them into *Verlan* using the method they had discerned from the example transformations. This process occurred three times: First for disyllables, then for closed monosyllables and trisyllables. The results from the speakers were then compared with the attested forms from the corpus in Goudailler (2001) and, for *prof*, from Weinberger and Lefkowitz (1989).

Disyllabic words were by far the easiest to verlanize, with both speakers giving the same *Verlan* form as listed in the corpus for all of the words. Closed monosyllabic words proved more difficult for the speakers. Speaker 2 never attempted to create a form using an epenthetic schwa and truncation, indicating that he did not understand the mechanism behind the transformation into *Verlan*. Speaker 1 did create such forms for the last two words, but only one of those matched the result from the corpus. The inconstancy of closed monosyllables in *Verlan* came through as the salient feature of the experiment, especially with the words *prof*, “teacher,” and *dame*, “lady.” If a speaker is not part of the group speaking *Verlan*, he or she could follow the rules for the game and still produce incorrect forms because of the irregularities placed in the system by the speakers. [mød] follows the rules for closed monosyllables, for example, yet in some circles could be deemed incorrect for *dame* because it was not [møda]. It is also interesting to note that the speakers differed in their parsing of the consonant cluster [pʁ] for *prof*, with Speaker 1 retaining the cluster and Speaker 2 producing what would be an ungrammatical form of *Verlan* where just the first and last phonemes reverse, but not onset or coda clusters.

The speakers agreed on a single form that differed from the given form in the corpus three times, once with [list] for *style* and twice for trisyllables. They did not shorten the syllable count of *dépouiller* in its *Verlan* form [pujede] and generated [libɤøka] for *calibre*. Both of these forms follow a single rule for trisyllabic transformation, the $(CV)_1(CV)_2(CV)_3 > (CV)_2(CV)_3(CV)_1$ rule that appears in the experiment in the form *bagarrer* [bagaɤe] > [gaɤeba]. However, the *Verlan* forms given by the speakers for *bagarrer* were both disyllabic and varied between each other. Similarly, forms for *esquiver* varied and did not match the form given in the corpus.

Such divergence between forms theoretically predicted by the rules behind *Verlan* and the actual output of native speakers leads to two conclusions. First, when the output forms of *Verlan* follow the simple underlying rules, uninitiated speakers can easily speak the language. This became evident from the speakers' facility with the simple transformations of disyllabic words. However, when the rules become more complicated and the *Verlan* forms follow them with less regularity, an uninitiated speaker may be able to produce a word that follows the mechanisms behind *Verlan*, but such a word can be deemed incorrect by speakers because it does not match their own output form. Simply put, speakers increase the secrecy of *Verlan* and reinforce the boundaries between the in-group speaking it and the outside community by following the rules loosely and using variant forms with little discernable pattern. The variance in the pilot experiment supports the sociolinguistic purpose of the game, as outlined above: Speakers twist or ignore the rules behind *Verlan* to increase its power as an identity marker and method of encryption.

4.0 Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine the exceptions to the phonological rules behind the French language game *Verlan* in order to determine what mechanisms lay behind them. A review of the existing work on *Verlan* showed that *Verlan* serves identificational, cryptic, and ludic functions. An analysis of corpora from 1991 to 2001 shows that exceptions to *Verlan* occur partly on the basis of a more relaxed usage of rules and the creation of sub-rules, dependent on the taste of the speaker and the group in which *Verlan* is used. Finally, a pilot experiment with two native speakers of French who were not fluent in *Verlan* showed that the rules of *Verlan* are easy to learn and use, but that they do not determine the final output of a word alone. Rather, as the analysis from the corpora supports, the formation of a “correct” form of *Verlan* depends on knowing which rules the group applies to which words to create specific terms.

Given the way in which it increases to spread beyond the *banlieue*, *Verlan*'s original speakers will only continue to modify it to retain the secrecy and group identity marking for which they use it. Just as speakers of Standard French use the *Académie* and social norms to protect the language that embodies their cultural identity from change, so speakers of *Verlan* will continue to change it to guard the game for themselves. *Verlan* will keep spreading, but, like *Smoi*, it will become more regionally focused and its correct usage will depend more on how well a speaker knows the words of a particular group. In this way, we can see that *Verlan* is less like a code and more like a language that changes and evolves over time. As such, *Verlan* will continue to reinforce *beur* culture, existing alongside French, but changing it, allowing its speakers to take the dominant culture and language and make it their own.

Appendix

In order to view firsthand the mechanisms of *Verlan* and their use by a native French speaker, I performed a small experiment with two speakers studying in the United States. I sought to determine whether a native speaker with little or no knowledge of *Verlan* could learn and correctly speak it. Speaker 1 was a female who had attended a French school for grades 2-10. Between ages 7 and 8 she lived in France, then a year in Tunisia. She subsequently lived in Germany, attending a French school there, until age 16, when she moved to the United States. Speaker 2 was a male born in Switzerland and, despite temporarily losing fluency in French around age 5, relearned it quickly and has spoken French ever since. He lived until age 11 in Switzerland, and after some years in other countries now resides in Paris.

In the experiment, I spoke four words in *Verlan* from the corpus in Goudailler (2001) to both speakers. I then asked them to use the mechanism they detected to determine the *Verlan* form of four other words and to orally produce those forms, which I transcribed. This method was used, in order, for disyllabic, closed monosyllabic, and trisyllabic words. The *Verlan* transformations given to the speakers are found below. When more than one *Verlan* form existed in the corpus, one was selected and used as the example form given to the speaker.

Disyllabic words

voiture [vwatʏʁ] > [tʏʁvwɑ]

travail [tʁavaj] > [vajtʁɑ]

pinard [pinɑʁ] > [nɑʁpi]

l'envers [lɑ̃vɛʁ] > [vɛʁlɑ̃]

Closed Monosyllables

mec [mɛk] > [køm]

mère [mɛʁ] > [ʁøm]

femme [fam] > [møf]

flic [flik] > [køf]

Trisyllables

défoncé [defɔ̃se] > [fɔ̃sede]

cigarette [sigʁɛt] > [gʁɛtsi]

carottes [kaʁɔt] > [kɔtka]

travailler [tʁavaje] [vajetʁa]

After each category of *Verlan* word, the speaker was given four words in Standard French and asked to put them into *Verlan* using the mechanism he or she had detected in the given forms. All words for this section came from Goudailler (2001) except for [fɔpʁo], which came from Weinberger and Lefkowitz (1989:43). The chart below shows the given results from the experiment. For each category of *Verlan* word, the word in Standard French is shown with its IPA transcription, followed by the form given in the corpus and the results given by the two speakers. Speaker 1 correctly gave the form [venɛr] for *énergé*, and then noted that she already knew of the transformation. Speaker 2 gave the same form more quickly than any of the other forms, indicating that he too possessed the word already in his lexicon. Therefore a fifth word was chosen to complete the data set for trisyllabic words.

Disyllabic	Transcription	Corpus	Speaker 1	Speaker 2
placard	[plakʁ]	[kʁpla]	[kʁpla]	[kʁpla]
français	[fʁɑ̃se]	[sefʁɑ̃]	[sefʁɑ̃]	[sefʁɑ̃]
bourgeois	[buʁʒwa]	[ʒwabuʁ]	[ʒwabuʁ]	[ʒwabuʁ]
claqué	[klakɛ]	[kekla]	[kekla]	[kekla]

Closed Monosyllabic

prof	[pʁɔf]	[fɔpʁo]	[fɔpʁ]	[fʁɔp]
style	[stil]	[løst]	[list]	[list]
bus	[bys]	[sɔb]	[sɔb]	[syb]
dame	[dam]	[mɔda]	[mɔd]	[mad]

Trisyllabic

dépouiller	[depuje]	[pujde]	[pujede]	[pujede]
calibre	[kalibɤ]	[bɤølika]	[libɤøka]	[libɤøka]
énervé	[eneɤve]	[venɤɤ]	[venɤɤ]	[venɤɤ]
bagarrer	[bagæɤ]	[gæɤeba]	[gæɤba]	[gæɤ]
esquiver	[ɤskive]	[vɤski]	[kiveɤ]	[kiseve]

Analysis of the above data set is found in section 3 of the paper.

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