

A sociolinguistic study of *Verlan* in the town of Oyonnax, France

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i. Abstract

Whilst spending a year working in a small town in the *Ain* department of France, I noticed two things about the local population. The first was that the town, Oyonnax, appeared to host a large number of immigrants. This is not unusual in larger cities in France, such as Paris or Marseilles, but it is less commonplace in rural areas. Secondly, through my job as a language assistant in a high school, I became aware of the prominence of Verlan in conversation; a form of slang featuring the inversion of syllables to create new words, mainly used by North African and Muslim populations as an in-group or secret language. To take one of the most common examples, the word “*métro*” [metro], meaning “subway” or “underground system, undergoes an inversion of syllables to produce the Verlan word “*tromé*” [trome]. However, Verlan did not seem to be an exclusively non-white phenomenon; I heard it spoken by almost all of my students at one point or another, regardless of ethnic or social background. Thus I decided to conduct a study into the sociolinguistic aspects of the variety of Verlan spoken in Oyonnax, to find out which social groups actively used it in speech and for what reasons; this data was then used to ascertain whether or not the traditional purpose of Verlan has changed over time.

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1. An overview of in-group and secret languages

Verlan, a French in-group language which first came into existence in the housing projects of the outskirts of Paris, became an exhaustive area of study in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Essentially an inversion of the syllables of certain words, it quickly gained notoriety as a method of disguising criminal activity in the *banlieues* (city outskirts) from the police. These days, Verlan appears to be used much less maliciously and by a wider social spectrum, although some of the original prejudices against its use still remain. In this section, we will take a more general look at the linguistic phenomenon of languages and lexicons whose usage is confined to a particular social or ethnic group, with the intention of obtaining a clearer understanding of the motivations behind Verlan itself.

The 1995 publication *Languages and Jargons: Contributions to a Social History of Language*, edited by Burke and Porter shed some light on the various objectives and successes (or not, as the case may be) of secret languages. As a preface, Burke himself gives a comprehensive overview of in-group languages in general. An article by Roberts, *Masonics, Metaphor and Misogyny: A Discourse of Marginality* (1995) talks about the language of Freemasons, and the purpose it serves of excluding the non-initiated, especially women. Finally, Peters' 2006 thesis discusses so-called "ludlings" as language games, and how this relates to Verlan as a whole.

1.1 Identifying features and objectives of in-group and secret languages

In Europe in particular there is a plethora of slang lexicons, such as *Rotwelsch* in German, *furbesco* in Italian and of course *argot* in French (all examples given in Burke 1995:2), as will be discussed in chapter 1.2.

Burke (1995) identifies the four main applications of in-group and secret languages as being cryptolects, identity markers, jargons, or *lingua franca*s. Cryptolectal use of language seems to be the area that has garnered the greatest amount of scholarly interest, perhaps due to the somewhat seedy or scandalous

connotations associated with its employment. As is to be expected, cryptolects are very much confined to members of a group, and have a tendency to flourish in areas where the group members are closely surveyed, such as inmates in a prison (Burke 1991:9). I refer here to Roberts, who in her discussion of the Masonic language alludes to its intention to exclude women on the grounds that they are inferior to men; this manifests itself in the form of chauvinistic songs or “pornographic verse”, as she puts it (1991:144). We can contrast this with women’s use of language to exclude men. It has been noted (by Burke, 1995:11) that in many instances groups of women developed their own code language so that they were able to freely discuss sexual encounters without fear of disapproval. Another instance of cryptology in the Masonic language is the use of passwords to confirm the identity of a fellow Mason, with the examples *Jachin* and *Boaz* being cited (1991:138). Furthermore, as we will see in the upcoming discussion of *argot*, metaphors and tropology are frequently used within secret languages to make drug- or crime- related words appear more innocuous, such as “snow” or “grass” replacing the drug names “cocaine” and “cannabis” respectively in English slang (Burke 1991:15), and “it rains” or “it snows” alerting Freemasons to the presence of an intruder (Roberts 1991:140). These links with villainy (in the drugs example, at least) are further supported by Burke’s assertion that cryptolects are the “anti-language of a counter-culture, or a marginal language for marginal people” (1991:2).

The concept of language as an identity marker is linked to this; as previously stated, Masonic language makes use of passwords to identify other Freemasons, and the language as a whole is used to convey a sentiment of masculine superiority (Roberts 1991:135). Slangs and coded speech are also rife amongst ethnic minorities, for instance German and Polish Jews before and during the Second World War (Burke 1991:3), *Shelta* (see chapter 1.1.2) and of course Verlan.

The word “jargon” is used slightly pejoratively to refer to specialist vocabulary coined by various economic and social sectors, notably the *linguaggio arsenalesco* spoken by the Venetian arsenal and German hangman’s language. Student life is also prone to using jargon, with the Oxbridge universities and

certain *grandes écoles* being the biggest culprits; the slang word “fag”, used to refer offensively to a gay man, has transcended the jargon-slang boundary after originating from Oxford and Cambridge (Burke 1991:7).

A final and sometimes coincidental use of in-group language is as a *lingua franca*; that is to say, a common language between speakers of two distinct tongues who would normally be unable to communicate with each other. Burke talks about the East African tongue Swahili. Originally coming into existence as a *lingua franca* to facilitate trade, it was then adopted in some East African countries. More recently, it has become the official language of Tanzania, amongst other countries (1991:17). We can talk about pidgins in the same way, which often evolve into creoles and may eventually be validated as an official language system.

Of course, in-group languages are often stigmatised and there are prejudices against those that speak them; the most obvious example is probably the racism and xenophobia encountered by the Jewish population of Germany during the 1930s, clearly not entirely as a result of their speech, given the political climate at the time, but it certainly would have highlighted cultural differences. “Inkhorn terms”, unnecessarily “flowery” expressions, were also criticised by French and British scholars for being too pretentious (Burke 1991:10-11).

1.1.1 Language games and word formation in some secret languages

Of course, secret languages do not always have to function as cryptolects. They can also serve a ludic purpose, as in the case of language games or “ludlings”.

In the same way as what can perhaps be considered their more sinister counterparts, terms produced as a result of language games can again be employed as a means of concealment, but as the name suggests, this is intended much more playfully than in the case of a true cryptolect or jargon. They are also seen as an assertion of identity by those who use them (this is especially relevant in Verlan; see chapter 2.2), or can even enhance the meaning or emphasise a

particular word. Verlan would qualify as a “reversal ludling” (Peters 2006:2), in which a lexical item undergoes metathesis¹ (syllabic inversion, for the sake of simplicity) to form a new item. Pig Latin and British backslang follow the same pattern; Peters discusses Pig Latin, in which the word-initial syllable moves to the end of the word, then tagged with an [ə] sound (this is also a phenomenon in Verlan; see chapter 2.1.2). He exemplifies this with the English phrase “I like cheese”, which ends up having the phonetic realisation [aie aikle istʃe] (2006:2).

1.1.2 Traveller’s language or *Shelta* in Ireland

One such example of a secret language a bit closer to home is the so-called “Travellers’ language”. From an academic viewpoint, the collection of essays *Travellers and their language*, put together by Kirk and Ó Baoill (2002), covers the topic rather extensively; essays by Kirk and Ó Baoill themselves and ní Shuinéar go some way to explain the roots and etymology of this tongue. Travellers’ language, or *Cant* as Kirk and Ó Baoill call it (one of several names given by various authorities on the matter) exists amongst nomadic cultures in both Scotland and Ireland, although it is generally accepted that, due to temporal and geographic factors, the two varieties are now relatively distinct. For the sake of simplicity, the Irish variety will be the one studied in this subchapter.

Shelta, the name given to Travellers’ language by British scholars, is actually rather contemptuous and is not a term used by the community itself, strictly speaking. It comes from the word *siúil*, “to walk”, from which *siúltóir* (literally, “a walker”) is derived; the pronunciation of this word originally being [ʃu:ltɔ:r], British scholars dropped the [r] sound, giving us in turn the word *Siùl-ta* or *Shelta* [ʃu:ltə] (ní Shuinéar 2002:21). It is generally accepted that *Shelta* has its roots in both Irish and Scottish *Gaelic*, borrowing some terms from Romany along the way (Kirk & Ó Baoill 2002:2). Its appearance and usage predates the Irish famine of the 1840s, but it was particularly prominent between 1882 – 1908, when scholars sparked off a “*Shelta* craze” (ní Shuinéar 2002:22).

¹ See section 2.1.1 for a brief discussion of the metathesis process.

In terms of word formation processes, there do not seem to be any set rules by which *Cant* or *Shelta* expressions are coined, instead incorporating several means common to many in-group and secret languages. In Kirk and Ó Baoill's terms, "[s]ecretion processes are phonological and include syllable inversion, phonological substitution, addition of initial consonant clusters etc." (2002:2). Ní Shuinéar backs this up in her essay *The Curious Case of Shelta* (2002), claiming that many Irish and *Shelta* words are a product of the metathesis of English words in the first place (English *nose* is given as an example, which becomes *srón* after the original word is reversed and an [r] sound added)(2002:34). The process of metathesis links *Shelta* to both Verlan and French *argot*, as will be discussed later.

One account written by an anonymous traveller (2002) gives a more sociological perspective on Travellers' language, in particular *Cant* and *Gammon*. From this we can glean that the travelling community has a lot of pride, but is well aware of the discrimination that they face, particularly with regard to their lack of formal education. Ní Shuinéar states that the general outside perception of travellers is that they are "dropouts, bogus Romanies or peasants in a timewarp" (2002:37), while the anonymous traveller complains about the use of the derogatory term *knacker* with reference to her people (2002:169), prejudices also encountered by speakers of Verlan (see chapter 2.2). In some situations, use of *Cant* or *Gammon* in public is frowned upon as it means identifying oneself as a member of that community, which can be dangerous if anyone within earshot bears such prejudices (2002:174).

Generally, though, the actual reasons behind the use of Travellers' language are disputed. Unlike French Verlan and *argot*, *Shelta* has never become quite widespread enough for the Irish population to understand and assimilate into their own usage, but according to ní Shuinéar, is "still recognisable to Travellers in Ireland" (2002:30), hinting that although the language may be less common today, it still forms a large part of the travellers' culture. Taking into account certain attitudes towards the travelling community, and the assumptions made about their way of life, one might be forgiven for believing that *Shelta* has a cryptolectal function, i.e. it serves the purpose of concealing criminal or

questionable activity from the public at large, not entirely unlike Anglo-Romani (ní Shuinéar 2002:30). However, due to the fact that the language is more commonly accepted as being formed through the borrowing of terms from Irish, this theory can be dismissed in part at least. Contemporary usage of *Shelta* can probably be accredited more to a desire to preserve the Travellers' culture; in the account of the anonymous traveller, she complains that when outsiders began to understand Travellers' language it felt as though they were losing their identity (2002:174).

1.2 Argot as a precursor to Verlan

For a general overview of the role of in-group and secret languages present in French society, it is essential to research in some depth *argot*, a lexis of French words comparable to Anglo-Saxon slang which provides the roots of modern Verlan. I refer first to François-Geiger (1991), who gives a comprehensive account of French *argot*, comparing the similarities of grammatical and phonetic features to those of standard French. She also discusses "traditional" *argot* (which actually consists of various different *argots* brought about by diverse social activities and trades as a sort of jargon) and, interestingly enough, the slightly oxymoronic notion of *argot classique*, a term coined by *argot* purists. From the same publication, *L'argot comme variation diastratique, diatopique et diachronique* (Calvet, 1991) explains how *argot* is relevant on, as one may guess from the title, social, geographical and temporal levels. Peters (2006) also touches briefly on the theme of *argot*, although his thesis *C'est pas blesipo: Variations of Verlan* concentrates more, as one might expect, on Verlan.

As *argot* does not alter the grammatical or phonetic features of spoken French, we can assert that it is not so much a language, rather a lexis, and "common" *argot* is quite easily comparable to generic Anglo-Saxon slang (François-Geiger 1991:8). While most slangs are indeed one way of enriching the vocabulary of the language, to say something in *langue argotique* often does not carry the same connotations as in standard French. *Argot* also plays with the notion of metaphor, as remarked upon by both François-Geiger (1991:5) and

Calvet (1991:43). Calvet goes into some depth on the etymology of the word *argent*, “money”, a word with a number of synonyms in many languages. *Argotique* terms for *argent* often fall within the lexical field of food, with words such as *blé*, *galette* and *douille* cropping up in familiar usage, rather like English speakers may use “dough” or “gravy”; the word *douille* in particular is a prime example of diatopia in *argot*, as it actually refers to a type of cake which is traditionally eaten in Normandy (Calvet 1991:44). This quite nicely shows the speaker’s perception that money is linked to nourishment in some way. Interestingly, another quite common slang word for *argent* is *pognon*, the etymological roots of which can perhaps be analysed as follows;

“Le mot *pognon*, “argent”, a longtemps été interprété [...] comme dérivé de *pogne*, lui-même venant de *poigne*, explication séduisante puisqu’elle repose sur une métaphore tout à fait plausible qui verrait l’argent comme ce que l’on tient dans la main.” (Calvet 1991:43)

Taking the above explanation into account, the fact that an *argotique* term for “money” could have evolved from the French word for “grip” fits in well with the idea of metaphor and metonymy, although some etymologists dispute this claim. Still, this wordplay fits in well with the intended usage of these slang words, as traditionally, *argot* has a coding function, as we will see.

In Peters’ 2006 thesis on Verlan (discussed in more detail in chapter 2), he maintains that the word *argot* came into circulation in 1628, and has “always borne a connotation of crime and social taboo” (2006:8). François-Geiger backs this up, splitting use of French *argot* into two main categories; firstly, its original intended use as a cryptolect by various gangs in nineteenth century France as a means of concealing criminal activity, and secondly, the *parlers branchés* (this could be translated as “trendy speech”) employed within different areas of culture as a means of identification, and again, of concealing messages (1991:5). Some purists still mourn the loss of *argot classique*, another variety of *argot* which is rapidly going out of fashion, but is still fondly used by some speakers in northeast Paris. This variation is seen (by its advocates, at least) as being the true form of *argot*; coming into usage towards the end of the nineteenth century,

it was spoken as a means of encrypting any dubious topic of conversation, but particularly those involving sex, alcohol or money (François-Geiger 1991:6).

In its modern usage, *argot* is no longer restricted to the same lexical fields and themes as before, and can now be found in most areas of French culture, especially where there is a good deal of youth influence and new words and phrases are constantly being innovated, such as music and fashion (François-Geiger 1991:5)(the aforementioned *parlers branchés* are quite relevant in this context). François-Geiger also mentions *argot de métiers* (1991:5), or jargon, which is often unintelligible to people who do not work or fraternise within a particular sector. This is why *argot* is often discussed in the plural form *argots*, as so many different varieties exist in so many different contexts (and are not always mutually comprehensible) that they cannot all come under the umbrella of one single *argot* lexicon. In fact, the tolerance of *argot* in the French language has reached a point where many of the more common words can now be found in the dictionary, marked by the abbreviation *arg.*; François-Geiger cites *boulot* and *bossier* as examples, meaning “job” and “to work” respectively (1991:8). Calvet links this to his argument that *argot* shows some evidence of diastatia, as a number of argotic words have transcended the boundaries of jargon and have been adopted into everyday language (1991:42).

In some ways, Verlan can be viewed as a revival of the traditional functions of *argot*; a fundamentally oral phenomenon, it is particularly prevalent in large urban conurbations and in some cases has similar functions (namely, as a means of disguising certain topics of conversation from *non-initiés*)(François-Geiger 1991:8). Indeed, Calvet’s argument that *argot* is relevant on a diachronic level stems from his belief that argotic terms provide the basis for Verlan (1991:42). However, as has been the case with *argot*, modern-day usage of Verlan is beginning to become more universal, as we will discover in the next chapter.

2. An Introduction to Verlan

2.1 The morphology of Verlan

After having discussed and understood in-group and secret languages on a more general level, Verlan itself can be studied more thoroughly. When compared to other secret and in-group languages, we can see that Verlan does not possess a particularly complex morphology, but it still merits study. Obviously there is a vast amount of literature on the topic, with works by Plénat (1995) and Azra & Cheneau (1994) all going into some depth on the morphological processes which words and phrases undergo to become *verlanised*, but it is studies by Méla that have proved the most pertinent; her article *Verlan 2000* illustrates the *verlanisation* of di- and tri-syllables, as well as open and closed monosyllables, and explains the truncation process, which will be discussed in more detail later on. I incorporate some of her examples into my own comparatively brief explanation of the morphological processes involved in *verlanisation*.

2.1.1 A note on metathesis

Having alluded to this in chapter 1, it would make sense to give a brief explanation of metathesis, the process involved in *verlanisation* and the formation of words in other reversal ludlings. Broadly speaking, metathesis works on a phonological level, with the syllables of a word being reordered to varying extents. In Spencer and Zwicky's *The Handbook of Morphology*, they give the example of a child mispronouncing the word "ask" as /aks/ (2001:138). Extra phonemes are routinely affixed to words, as a means of, as Spencer and Zwicky put it, "phonological repair of an illicit phonotactic combination resulting from the affixation" (2001:138). This is evident in the practice of *schwa* affixation in Verlan, as will be seen in the next section.

2.1.2 Monosyllables and the affixation of [ə]

In the case of open monosyllables, the transformation of a word is a case of it undergoing *une interversion* (Plénat 1995: 98), a simple consonant-vowel inversion, so to speak. The word *chaud*, transcribed phonetically as [ʃo],

becomes [oʃ], and in the slightly more complex case of [mwa] (*moi*), in which we find two adjacent consonant sounds, the word undergoes a shuffling of consonants to become [wam] (*ouam*).

The difficulty comes when speakers want to *verlanise* a closed monosyllable. Thus, it is only natural that speakers of Verlan would have found a way to transform closed monosyllables into disyllables, which Méla manages to encapsulate with her explanation of what she calls the “adjonction du schwa épenthétique” (1991: 77; also mentioned in Plénat 1995). It is a well-known feature of certain dialects of French (for example, in some areas of Paris and along the Mediterranean coast) that speakers may not only pronounce the *e muet* at the end of a word, but also add the phoneme [ə] to the end of a word which does not already end in *e*. Méla cites *mère*, *mec* and *juif* as examples, which become [mɛrə], [mɛkə] and [ʒɥifə] respectively.

This “resyllabification” allows the schwa *épenthétique* to form part of the new syllable, thus the monosyllabic word become disyllabic, as follows;

1. (a) *mère* [mɛrə] @ *reum-e* [rømɛ]

(b) *mec* [mɛkə] @ *keum-e* [kømɛ]

(c) *juif* [ʒɥifə] @ *feuj-ui* [føʒɥi]

2.1.3 Disyllables and trisyllables

As we will see in chapter 2.4, disyllables are by far the most common forms amongst the Verlan terms. The simplest scenario is that of two open syllables in a disyllable, for example [si] and [te] in *cité*, inverting to create *téci* (from Méla 1997:18). Disyllables in which the syllables are closed undergo the same process, as in the case of *basket* (trainer), which becomes *sketba*, ending in an open syllable rather than the closed *ketbas*. In instances where a liquid consonant occurs, such as [l] in the verb *calmer*, the preferred option is for the *verlanised* word to end in the liquid consonant rather than a vowel ([merkə] being seen as more acceptable than [lmerka]).

Méla alludes to the truncation of certain disyllables to create monosyllables, although this is thought to be more a process of *argot*, which makes use of various *mots tronqués* (1997: 24). A few such examples are listed below, in which the final vowel sound is omitted;

2. (a) *métro* [metro] ® *tromé* [trome] ® *trom* [trom]

(b) *parents* [parã] ® *renpa* [rãpa] ® *renp* [rãp]

(c) *chinois* [jinwa]® *noichi* [nwaʃi] ® *noich* [nwaʃ]

Trisyllables are slightly more problematic. Very few trisyllabic forms actually exist in the Verlan lexicon, and these can be *verlanised* in a few different ways (Méla 1997:22). The word *cigarette*, [sigarɛt], for instance, becomes [garɛtsi]; the first syllable moves to the end of the word, whilst the other two syllables stay intact. *Verité*, [verite], *verlanises* to [teveri], in which the first two syllables do not change order, but both are moved to the end of the word and the final syllable becomes the initial. Conversely, a word like *papillon*, [papijõ], undergoes a complete scrambling of syllables to create [jõpipa] (although such occurrences are quite rare).

Most trisyllables instead eliminate a *schwa* sound wherever possible, in line with the *verlophone* preference for disyllabic words; *batterie* (a “battery” or a “drum kit”) omits [ə] to first become [batri], then [triba]. Similarly, *travelo* (“drag queen”) *verlanises* to [vlotra] via [travlo] (Méla 1997:19).

2.2 Verlan today: who uses it and why?

Verlan is not a new phenomenon; indeed, we have already seen that it has roots in French *argot* (chapter 1.2). However, according to some sources, Verlan may have appeared even earlier than that. The concept of transforming a word by the inversion of its syllables was first seen in Bérroul's middle age text, *Le Roman de Tristan* (1190), in which the name of the novel's hero, Tristan, becomes *Tantris* (Azra & Cheneau, 1994:149). Needless to say, the use of Verlan

has progressed vastly since then, not only in terms of its lexis, but also with regards to who exactly uses it on a regular basis.

In Chomskyan terms, Verlan is not a grammatical practice but rather a social one (Azra & Cheneau, 1994:151), regardless of the morphological processes a word must undergo to become *verlanised* (chapter 2.1). In Peters' words, "...Verlan serves primarily as an identity marker, not as a semantic addition to a sentence." (2006:3) Spoken as a means of rebellion against the purity of the French language, which is more strictly regulated than most by the *académie française*, it is often seen as a means of identification and solidarity with a very particular social group. In its earlier incarnations, Verlan (itself an inversion of the word *l'envers*, literally "back to front") was an innovation of the offspring of immigrants from former French colonies and Muslim countries such as Algeria, Morocco and Turkey. Themselves first-generation French citizens, they have struggled to fit in with both their parents' and French culture, in some cases perhaps due to the 1993 *Méhaignerie* act which required the children of immigrants to request French citizenship, regardless of the fact that they were born in France (France-Diplomatie, 2009). The act has since been revoked, but the feelings of exclusion still remain. This section of society was, and still is, disproportionately poor, often confined to the HLM (*habitation à loyer modéré*) on the outskirts of cities such as Paris and Marseilles. Inhabitants become trapped in a vicious cycle of being too destitute to afford a good education, thus not being skilled enough to take on anything other than manual labour. As a result, few ever have the chance to leave the *banlieue*, and the cycle starts again. Even now, as the second and third generations of these families are being born into French society, some still feel like second-class citizens, and so have created for themselves a kind of underground society within which Verlan is the primary means of coded communication, as well as of exclusion of the uninitiated.

Verlan is not only a means of inclusion, but as with many other in-group languages, a way to "scramble" a word or message to hide criminal or dubious activity, for example *teshi* from *le shit* (a French slang term for cannabis) and *keuf* for *flic*, a rather derogatory name for a police officer (Méla 1991:77). It is also extremely prevalent in the lexical fields of sex and relationships, the body,

ethnicity, drugs and violence. This can be accredited to the fact that a Verlan term may be "softer", less brash, and without the connotations and taboos of the original word; take the very common *beur* used in place of *arabe*, or *caillera*, the inversion of *racaille*, a word which president Nicolas Sarkozy used in 2005 (meaning something like the English word "scum") to describe delinquent members of society.

Interestingly, Verlan is also more prevalent amongst males than females, a common feature of secret languages. As Méla puts it, some female speakers eschew Verlan as they see it as "le parler des garçons"² (1991:91). It is also more likely that boys would be discussing these taboo subjects than girls, and perhaps with regards to traditional gender values, they feel it is more important in asserting their identity than a female would.

Of course, Verlan has gained wider recognition due to its exposure through hip-hop music and film, although its usage on a cultural scale is explored in greater depth in chapter 2.3.

These days, many French people use Verlan to some extent, regardless of race, age, gender or social class. As would be expected, different varieties of Verlan have developed over time, almost certainly from diatopic (from experience, Lyonnais Verlan is quite different to the Parisian variety) and diastratic points of view. As Peters says, "...it can (...) distinguish yuppies from street kids" (2006:9). Lefkowitz (1991) claims that some members of the *bourgeoisie* may try to show empathy or awareness of social problems by using Verlan. To quote Azra and Cheneau;

"On se souviendra de Mitterand (François, the former French president) répondant à un journaliste lui demandant ce que signifie *chébran*; "Ça veut dire *branché*..."³ (1994:149)

Additionally, we cannot forget the more widespread usage encountered in the town of Oyonnax, the basis of this paper. As the study develops, we will see

² "Boys' speech"

³ "We remember Mitterand responding to a journalist who had asked him what *chébran* meant; "It means *branché* ("trendy")..."

how, and if, the significance of contemporary Verlan usage has changed with regards to its cryptic and in-group functions.

2.3 The spread of Verlan in popular culture

One of the most telling indicators that Verlan is not just a passing fad has been its diffusion across French media. A mode of speech that was once only heard on news reports from the Parisian *banlieues* is now omnipresent in France's film and music industry. The aforementioned thesis by Nathaniel Peters highlights the cultural importance of the 1995 French film *La Haine*, in which the director Matthieu Kassowitz draws on French society's understanding of Verlan. It also became evident that it has been incorporated into music, as seen in Isabelle Marc Martínez book, *Le rap français. Esthétique et poétique des textes, 1990-1995* (2008). Marc Martínez gives a more in-depth account of the use of Verlan in popular music, specifically rap music, which in France tends to be produced and listened to by the *maghrébin* population. Marc Martínez's work demonstrates how Verlan is used slightly differently in music, and sometimes serves to intensify rather than scramble a message. In the same vein, a 2000 article by Tony Mitchell, whilst not exactly going into much depth on the subject of Verlan in French rap music, goes some way to explain why so-called "resistance vernaculars" are so prevalent on the scene, and indeed how and why the immigrant population has created an identity for itself through rap music.

2.3.1 Usage of Verlan in rap music

These days we would be very likely to encounter Verlan in hip-hop music. It would appear that when Verlan is used in rap music, it is not so much used cryptically these days, but instead allows the listener to feel part of the movement as well as emphasising the message of the music. As Marc-Martínez puts it;

"[Verlan] n'a pas pour fonction de brouiller le message, mais, au contraire, de l'intensifier par l'accumulation de synonymes." (2008:271)

Despite this, it is still important to note the roots of French hip-hop. Mitchell maintains that rappers and hip-hop artists have always looked to their ethnic background for inspiration, and have used this to forge a strong identity (2000:5); although he does not explicitly mention Verlan, it can obviously be considered to be an important feature of this identity, and he does allude to *Cefron*, another language formed in French suburbs, as being an in-group marker which is sometimes used in hip-hop music (2000:6).

Hip-hop music has also created for itself a sort of sub-lexicon of Verlan, in which the most important words within the realm of rap music are almost better known in this form (Marc-Martinez, 2008:271); I give as examples the word *rappeur* itself, *verlanised* into *peura*, and the name of the well-known artist MC Solaar, also known as *Laarso*. Unlike the previously discussed “common” *verlanisations* of slang words, the rapper Ministère AMER has branched out into inverting everyday words (i.e., those not considered to be *argotique* or slang) namely *maneci* (*cinéma*) and *naisco* (*connais*) (2008:271), thus giving strength to the argument that the Verlan is no longer only used cryptically.

2.3.2 Matthieu Kassowitz's *La Haine*

Unsurprisingly, cinematic representations of Verlan and its speakers are often in line with the stereotype. The most obvious example, the 1995 film *La Haine*, is probably the epitome of this. The film's events take place against the backdrop of a Parisian council estate, with three different ethnicities represented among the main characters; a Jew, an Arab and an African. Without wishing to go into too much detail on the plot line, the film goes a long way to show the everyday frustrations of residents of *la zone* (the “slum belt”). The whole premise of the film is the desire of Vinz, the Jewish character, to track down and kill a policeman in the aftermath of a race riot, and at many points in the film the characters appear to be doing nothing but sitting around chatting; this is perhaps reflective of the lack of education or employment available to them. When they do venture into central Paris, they are met with hostility from the police and other Parisians.

Concerning the amount of Verlan spoken in the film, Kassowitz appears to have made it as “viewer-friendly” as possible whilst also conveying the message that the characters’ speech is different to that of the more *bourgeois* society that they encounter in central Paris. Peters sums this up well;

“The characters speak Verlan only amongst themselves, never to adults inside or outside the *banlieue* [suburbs]...they use Verlan for drug vocabulary and employ many of the better-known terms: *keuf*, from *flic*, “cop, pig,”...*téci*, from *cité*, “ghetto.” (2006: 15)

Peters also stresses the fact that although the characters never use more than a few words of Verlan at a time (presumably to facilitate the comprehension of the viewer), what is considered to be the most important word in the sentence is usually the one that is *verlanised*, giving that word some kind of emphatic quality (2006:15).

La Haine having been released fifteen years ago, we can assume that Verlan has since become a more universal phenomenon, but it remains a good indicator of its origins and intended usage.

2.4 Seine-Saint-Denis: a case study

During my research I came across a case study of Verlan carried out in 1994 by Azra and Cheneau, including an analysis of a corpus taken from the Saint-Denis *arrondissement* of Paris, located on the north westerly outskirts of the city. This suburb is widely considered as one of the most impoverished urban areas of France with a high immigrant population and crime rate; referring to statistics from INSEE, we can see that 5,765 of the 17,852-strong population are *étrangers*, equating to roughly 30% (INSEE 2006), meaning that the population size and native to immigrant ratio is rather similar to Oyonnax, as we will see in chapter 2.5.

In this particular study, Azra and Cheneau ensured that all participants were in Saint-Denis on at least a daily basis, whether for work or study, or they lived there. The literature claims that Azra himself is an active speaker of Verlan

(so obviously a native French speaker), although it is not made entirely clear whether or not he is one of the interlocutors.

2.4.1 Results

Upon analysis of their single heterogeneous corpus, Azra and Cheneau found a total of 385 *verlanised* words. Of these words, they would only vouch for 337, claiming that as the other 48 sounded unfamiliar to them as native speakers, they could actually be nonce words, or only used by one facet of the population. They also chose to reject disyllabic words which added an [ə] (*schwa*) to make them trisyllabic (see chapter 2.1); however, this sort of process is considered perfectly acceptable by other authorities on the subject.

They also include a table, reproduced here, showing how often words of varying syllabic length appeared in their corpus. We can therefore deduce that Verlan shows a definite preference for disyllabic words.

	Mots français		Formes verlan	
	Corpus complet	Attestés	Corpus complet	Attestés préférentielles
Monosyllables	139	131	115	95
Disyllables	211	198	293	260
Trisyll. et +	35	8	28	2

Table 1

(1994:152)

As is to be expected, *verlanised* words occur most frequently in certain lexical fields, including;

“insultes et 'étiquettes'...vocabulaire sexuel, parties du corps, vêtements, objets de la rue...ethnies et groupes sociaux...relations de parenté.” (1994: 151)

Whilst I do not suppose that the results of my own study will perfectly mirror those of Azra and Cheneau (such a high rate of *verlanisation* is quite rare, for one), I do expect to encounter a relatively high number of *verlanised* words in my data, for reasons detailed in the next subchapter.

A similar study by Bachmann & Basier (1984) details a case study carried out in the northern outskirts of Paris. The data collection processes used (i.e. asking young people in a school environment to discuss in groups what they knew of Verlan) give a vague framework of how I carried out my own research, as detailed in the methodology section of this paper.

2.5 My own study: Oyonnax

As previously stated, Verlan is, or certainly was, seen as an exclusive means of communication between members of the North African (*Maghreb*) population, although this appears to have changed in recent years. Therefore it would be useful to incorporate some demographic studies of France and more specifically Oyonnax, which is why I refer here to the INSEE (*Institut National de la Statistique et des Etudes Economiques*) website, giving useful information taken from the 2006 census in France, which allowed me to look closely at the demographics of Oyonnax, including the gender and nationality of its occupants, which may have some bearing on the frequency of Verlan in the town.

Oyonnax itself seemed to be an especially interesting area for study. As a language assistant in a high school, I became aware of two things. Firstly, the town itself has a large Muslim population hailing from North Africa and Turkey. This is a direct result of Oyonnax's reputation as *la Plastics Vallée*; at the beginning of the 20th century, many of the plastics companies in the town drafted in a relatively cheap, largely unskilled workforce of immigrants, who have since settled in the town and are now third or fourth generation. Secondly, of the young people that I met and taught, I noticed an astonishing amount of

Verlan used in speech, and this was not just restricted to males of *maghrébin* descent; white females frequently used certain terms.

According to statistics from the INSEE, Oyonnax bucks French population trends in a number of ways. In 2006 (the year of the most recent census), Oyonnax had a total population of 23,618, of which 17,852 are French and 5,765 are immigrants (and this does not take into account those of non-French descent who were born in France)(INSEE 2006). Roughly speaking, immigrants make up 25% of the population of Oyonnax, compared to the national average of around 8%. Of the Oyonnaxien population, approximately 52% are *ouvriers* (factory or "blue-collar" workers) and 7% are unemployed, compared to 27% and 5% respectively in France as a whole (INSEE 2006).

Geographically, Oyonnax is quite an isolated town; due to its awkward position in the Jura mountain range, intercity transport is scarce, and very few "outsiders" have a reason to visit the town. Thus, this may have some bearing on the variety of Verlan spoken in the town, in that new terms may take longer to filter into the local lexicon, or the locals may even coin new Verlan terms themselves.

These factors made Oyonnax seem the perfect place to conduct a study into contemporary Verlan usage. The very fact that the town has an unusually large non-French population, coupled with the more working-class background of many of its inhabitants, may go some way to explain the frequency and number of Verlan terms which I encountered during my time there; as mentioned previously in this paper, Verlan tends to be more common in poorer areas with higher immigrant populations, in keeping with its traditional function as an identity marker.

3. Methodology

3.1 Degree of acquaintance with participants

Naturally, volunteers living in the town of Oyonnax were required to help with the study, and around one hundred seemed to be a decent number of

subjects for the questionnaire. My level of acquaintance with the participants varied quite vastly, but in general, those who agreed to take part in the study fell into one of three groups.

By far the largest group, most participants came in the form of students at the local *lycée* (high school) at which I worked for four months. A very obliging English teacher distributed the questionnaires amongst a number of pupils, but as all the questionnaires are anonymous, it is impossible to tell which students filled out which paper. That said, my name was mentioned at the top of the paper, so if any of my former pupils took part, they will have known that it was my work; whether or not this had any bearing on the responses, I will never know. These students spent on average one hour per week with me in a classroom situation, although I did know a few of them personally.

In addition to the students, some of the teachers at the *lycée* agreed to assist with the study, which diversified the age range of the volunteers somewhat; the inclusion of an older generation also enabled me to see how opinions and views on Verlan have changed over time. Of the teachers who filled out a questionnaire, I admit I only knew one or two of them, and this was based on an hour or so of colleague-to-colleague conversation each week.

Finally, In order to obtain samples from another age range, some personal friends and peers of my own age group took part too. Obviously I was much closer to this group in general and socialised with them in my free time. As aforementioned, all questionnaires are anonymous, but due to the intimacy of this cross-section of participants and the fact that most contact took place via e-mail, I was aware of each of their involvement in the study, as they were of mine.

3.2 Hypothesis

After analysis of the more general sociolinguistic tendencies of Verlan through examination of existing corpora, the presence of Verlan in the media, and local demographics, it would be fair to predict that a large portion of the population of Oyonnax use it in casual speech, although we will see a greater

frequency and appreciation of Verlan terms amongst young males of Turkish, Moroccan or Algerian descent.

3.3 Data collection procedures

3.3.1 Questionnaire

In order to collect data from as many subjects as possible, as legitimately as possible, it was decided that a questionnaire would be the easiest way to achieve this. One was designed in order to first ascertain the age, nationality, mother tongue, and social and ethnic background of the participant, followed by a series of questions formulated to deduce his or her thoughts and feelings on Verlan in general, based on the model of Bachman & Basier's 1984 study in Paris (see chapter 2.4). Before any questions directly related to Verlan were asked, participants were asked to note down any phrases or words that came to mind, as later on in the questionnaire they may have felt more vulnerable to prejudices or less likely to mention certain words. They were then asked if they spoke any other languages at home, if they used Verlan in their own speech (and if so, with whom and in which situations), why they used it and whether they felt that Verlan carried certain connotations or caused others to have prejudices against its speakers. All of these questions were formulated with an eye to proving or disproving the theory that Verlan is very much restricted to the immigrant lower classes.

Participants were then presented with a list of lexical variables (for example, *voiture* and *bagnole* both meaning "car", but *bagnole* being a much more colloquial term) and asked to identify which, if any, of the items they would be more likely to *verlanise*. This served the purpose of testing the hypothesis that slang words are more likely to be changed than more neutral ones. Finally, the participants were invited to add to the list with any other words or phrases that they felt were of note in the Verlan lexicon (To see the full version of the questionnaire, refer to Appendix I.).

3.3.2 Recordings

Having obtained enough information to get a rough idea of the groups of people that used Verlan and their reasons for this, it was now necessary to collect data from a cross-section of volunteers for analysis. With reference to the questionnaires, five subjects from different age ranges, ethnicities and social backgrounds were invited to further the study by recording themselves conversing with either friends or family, with the intention of transcribing the conversations and determining the number of Verlan words which occurred in a two-minute long speech event. The subjects were intentionally picked in an attempt to discover whether Verlan words occurred more frequently according to the previously mentioned social factors; i.e. whether a white, middle-aged French woman used Verlan words less frequently than a teenage *maghrébin* boy. As I was not present, the volunteers were able to record the conversations in their own time and in their own preferred situation, thus eliciting relatively natural speech.

3.4 Variables and problems encountered

As with any sociolinguistic study involving volunteers, there were a certain number of ethical issues that needed to be addressed, in addition to the classic problem of how to obtain the most natural dialogue possible from the subjects, as is detailed in chapter 3.4.1. As a general rule, no one was forced to complete a questionnaire, and those that did were told not to answer any questions that they did not feel comfortable answering.

One of the most sensitive areas covered was, of course, the question of social background, which needed to be raised in the questionnaire. Whilst one would imagine that, in the context of Verlan as a marker of someone's working-class or immigrant status, some subjects would be more than happy to identify themselves as belonging to this band, it was likely that others might be embarrassed to admit this. It was also conceivable that subjects might lie about their social class if asked outright, with some playing down a middle-class background to make their use of Verlan seem more authentic or acceptable.

The way around this seemed to be to ask the subjects to note down their occupations (in the case of students, their parents' occupation, as this gave a more realistic insight into social class than the fact that they attended a state school). This allowed the author to roughly gauge the family's income and level of affluence, and if the parents' occupations were given, whether or not the child lived in a single-parent family, which could have some bearing on the results. For the sake of simplicity, each career was assigned to one of three categories; lower class, middle class and upper class. Unlike traditional class labelling, the "lower class" label would apply to jobs of a more "hands-on" nature such as shop workers and manual labourers, or unemployed people. "Middle class" careers were deemed to require some form of qualification or a certain degree of experience in the field (e.g. teachers, nurses and labourers who owned their own businesses), as were "upper class" jobs including lawyers, doctors and high-ranking businesspeople.

Another problem was obtaining samples from a fair age-range; as the subjects were mainly *lycéens*, more data was obtained from 16-20 year olds than any other age group, despite the involvement of teachers and older acquaintances in the town. Having said that, age is not necessarily the most important factor in this study, and as a fair spread of ethnicities and social backgrounds took part, this should not have too much of an impact on the results.

One final and minor problem is the obvious fact that not all subjects may actually be *oyonnaxien*; that is to say, they may not have been born there or lived there all their lives. However, if they have undertaken some schooling in Yonnax, it is more than likely that they have adapted their speech patterns to fit in with their peers. If the hypothesis indeed bears out, adult speakers will use less Verlan in conversation anyway, and so their birthplace should not have any influence on their speech patterns.

3.4.1 The observer's paradox

With regards to the recording of conversations to be analysed, the presence of an interviewer or even simply a tape recorder may not result in the most natural speech being elicited. Despite the relatively small age gap between some of the subjects and myself, the relationship was still technically a “teacher-pupil” one, so these subjects may have felt uncomfortable speaking freely with an authoritative presence in the room. Additionally, speaking French as a second language, I felt that my own participation in the data collection processes would not be conducive to results as my presence may not elicit the most natural speech possible from the participants; it was quite likely that they would have “dumbed down” their speech as a means of facilitating comprehension for a non-native speaker.

In this instance, the geographical distance from the subjects proved helpful, as it was not possible to travel to France to actually record the conversations. Instead, certain subjects volunteered to record conversations with friends and family, meaning that they were not constantly aware of another presence in the room, and the proximity with their interlocutors meant that they felt comfortable enough to speak casually to one other. That said, when analysing the results, it is important to remember that the speakers may still have constantly been aware of the fact that this same “authoritative presence” would be analysing their speech.

4. Results and discussion

After a preliminary look at the questionnaires, five were discarded due to unsuitable or incoherent responses, giving a total of ninety-five questionnaires to analyse. The results of these are shown and summarised below.

4.1 Analysis of questionnaire data

As a means of ascertaining which variable had the greatest bearing on the participants’ use and views of Verlan, I first looked at their responses to the question “Parlez-vous le verlan? Si oui, dans quelles situations (en parlant ou en

écrivaint) et avec qui?”⁴, and noted their various answers in relation to their age, gender, ethnic background and social class.

Of the ninety-five respondents, forty-seven were male and forty-eight female (and so essentially a fifty-fifty split). Their perceived frequency of their own Verlan usage is given in tabular form below;

	Males		Females	
Never	10	21.28%	13	27.08%
Rarely	11	23.40%	15	31.25%
Sometimes	20	42.55%	17	35.42%
Frequently	6	12.77%	3	6.25%
Total	47	100.00%	48	100.00%

Table 2

So as we can see, the male participants have a greater tendency to speak (or at least, will more readily admit to speaking) Verlan than the females; for both sexes, the majority claimed to use it “sometimes”, but for males, 12.77% admitted to using it “frequently” whereas for females only 6.25% answered similarly. Conversely, a greater proportion of female participants answered “never” or “rarely” than their male counterparts. To illustrate this, the results are shown in graphical form;

⁴ “Do you speak Verlan? If so, in what context (spoken or written) and with who?”

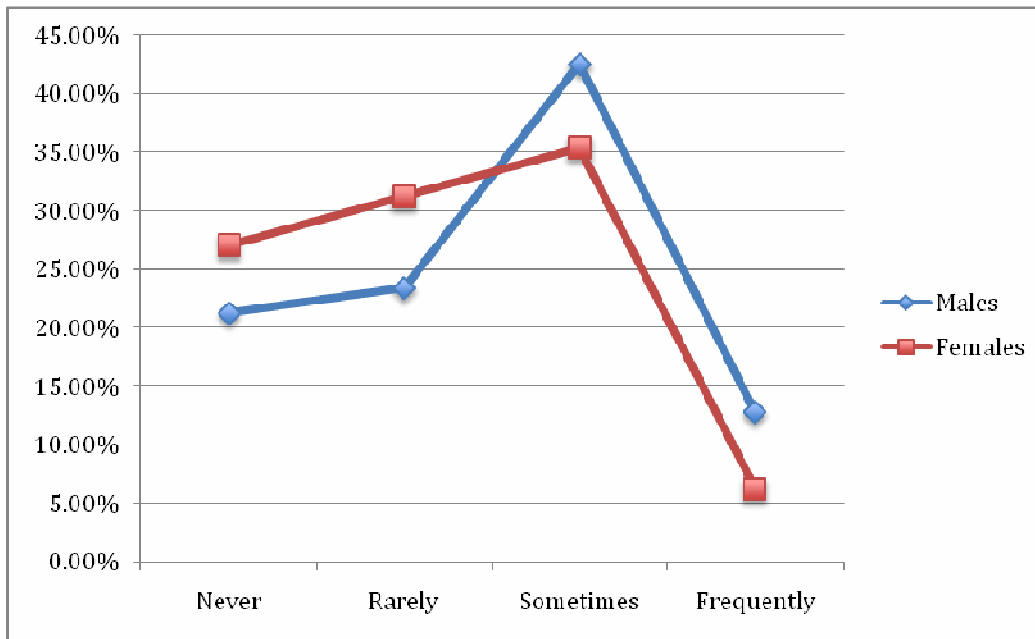


Chart 1

Where we can clearly see that for the frequencies “sometimes” and “frequently”, the males display a greater usage, while females gravitate more towards “never” and “rarely”.

The next variable examined was social class. As I remarked in chapter 2.2, Verlan tends to be more common amongst the working classes, although it is not necessarily a class marker. It has more to do with the fact that many *banlieusards* (“suburbanites”, although this does not carry the same connotations as in English), especially in Paris, are of North African or Turkish origin (and are thus Verlan speakers), and may find it difficult to escape from the poverty cycle of poor education and low funds equating to not being able to find a better job. In chapter 3, I described how participants were split into “classes” (although I stress that this was done quite tentatively, by asking participants their or their parents’ occupations rather than incomes, in order not to offend anyone). Understandably, not all subjects wished to answer this question; of the ninety-five, only sixty-five responded adequately. In Oyonnax, Verlan use relates to social class as follows;

	Lower		Middle		Upper	
Never	3	16.67%	11	27.50%	2	28.57%
Rarely	6	33.33%	6	15.00%	2	28.57%
Sometimes	8	44.44%	19	47.50%	3	42.86%
Frequently	1	5.56%	4	10.00%	0	0.00%
Total	18	100.00%	40	100.00%	7	100.00%

Table 3

As was perhaps to be expected, the social class variable threw up a mixed bag of results, suggesting that Verlan has perhaps transcended the class boundary in Oyonnax. The statistics show that in all three classes, participants were most likely to use Verlan “sometimes”, although interestingly, no participants deemed to be belonging to the upper classes saw their Verlan usage as frequent. This can be demonstrated further by the graph below;

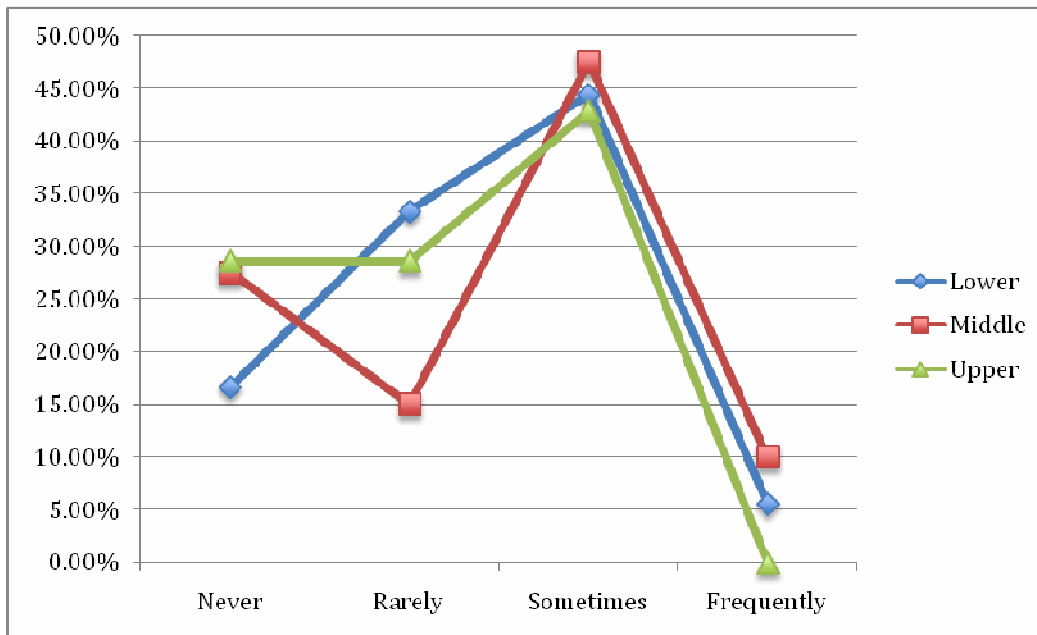


Chart 2

The graph reiterates the fact that most participants speak Verlan “sometimes” and very few use it “frequently” (none in the upper classes), but one other remarkable aspect is that fewer members of the lower classes said that

they “never” used Verlan (16.67%, and so most do use it to some extent), which partially fits in with my proposed hypothesis (chapter 3.2). If we are to believe previous literature on Verlan and French demographics (i.e. that citizens of *maghrébin* descent form a large part of the working classes, and these are the people that use Verlan the most), we could feasibly conclude that Verlan is still a linguistic marker of the working classes and therefore of the North African population. This can obviously be confirmed or denied by grouping the questionnaires submitted into separate ethnic groups, as seen below. I do believe, however, that a larger cross-section would need to be questioned on their social background to glean a more accurate result.

Next came the question of ethnicity; as we already know, Verlan originally came into being as a means of expression and an in-group language for the first-generation offspring of primarily North African immigrants (most notably hailing from Algeria, Morocco and Tunisia, although many Verlan speakers are also Turkish). Of the respondents, ten of the ninety-five were of *maghrébin* or Turkish nationality or descent; the vast majority were French (fifty-nine) and twenty-six had links to other countries, whether by nationality or by parentage (an impressive range including Bolivia, Germany, Cambodia, Poland and Cape Verde, to name but a few). Their usage of Verlan is classified thus;

	French		Maghrébin/Turkish		Other	
Never	15	25.42%	1	10.00%	7	26.92%
Rarely	14	23.73%	5	50.00%	7	26.92%
Sometimes	26	44.07%	1	10.00%	10	38.46%
Frequently	4	6.78%	3	30.00%	2	7.69%
Total	59	100.00%	10	100.00%	26	100.00%

Table 4

These results seem to fit in well with my hypothesis that the biggest users of Verlan would be the *maghrébin* community, as indeed 30.00% of this group claimed to use Verlan on a frequent basis. Again, these results are clearer in the graph;

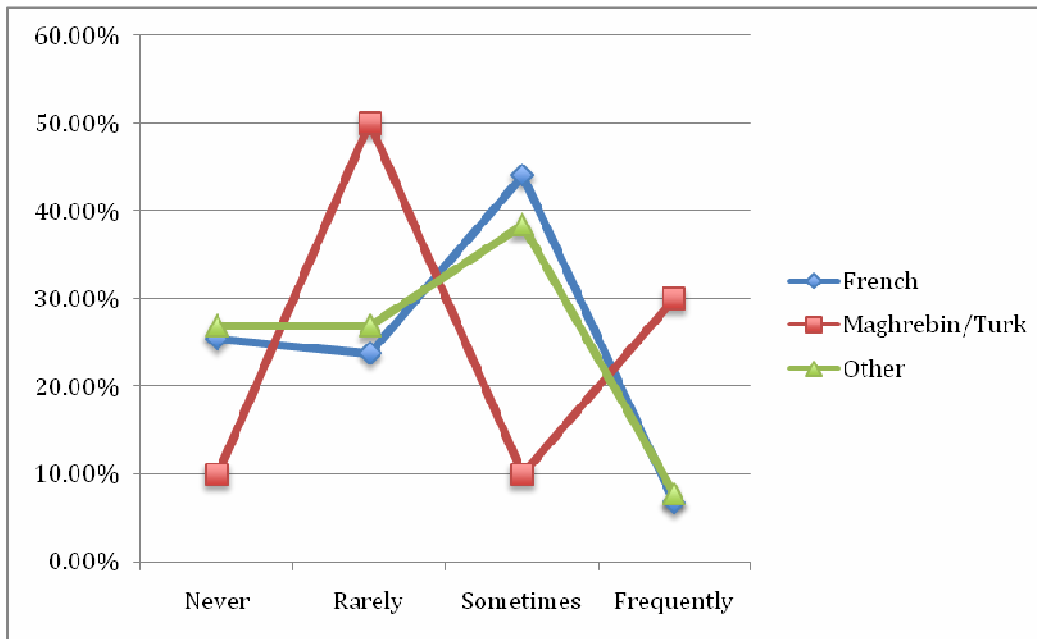


Chart 3

Where we can again see that the speakers that use Verlan “frequently” tend to be of North African or Turkish descent. Nevertheless, the other statistics are at odds with this. *Maghrébin* and Turkish participants were also the group most likely to “rarely” use Verlan (although very few “never” use it); this ethnic group may either be using Verlan to prove a point (to show in-group status, to exclude others, etc.) or conscientiously choosing not to use it to get away from the stereotype. Participants falling in both the French and other nationality categories showed a relatively similar frequency of usage, with the majority (around 40% in each case) claiming to use Verlan terms “sometimes” in casual speech.

The factor which showed the most variation across Verlan usage, however, was age; the next subsection is dedicated to a more in-depth discussion of the differences in reasons for using and prejudices against Verlan, and some possible explanations for this.

4.1.1 Discussion of Verlan use related to age

Admittedly, my work on this variable was somewhat hindered by a disproportionate cross-section of participants between the ages of 10-20, but this was to be expected, given that most of the questionnaires were distributed in a high school. To begin with, let us look at the data for Verlan usage with regards to age in graphical form. For ease of reading, the tables showing the raw data and percentages can be found in Appendix II.

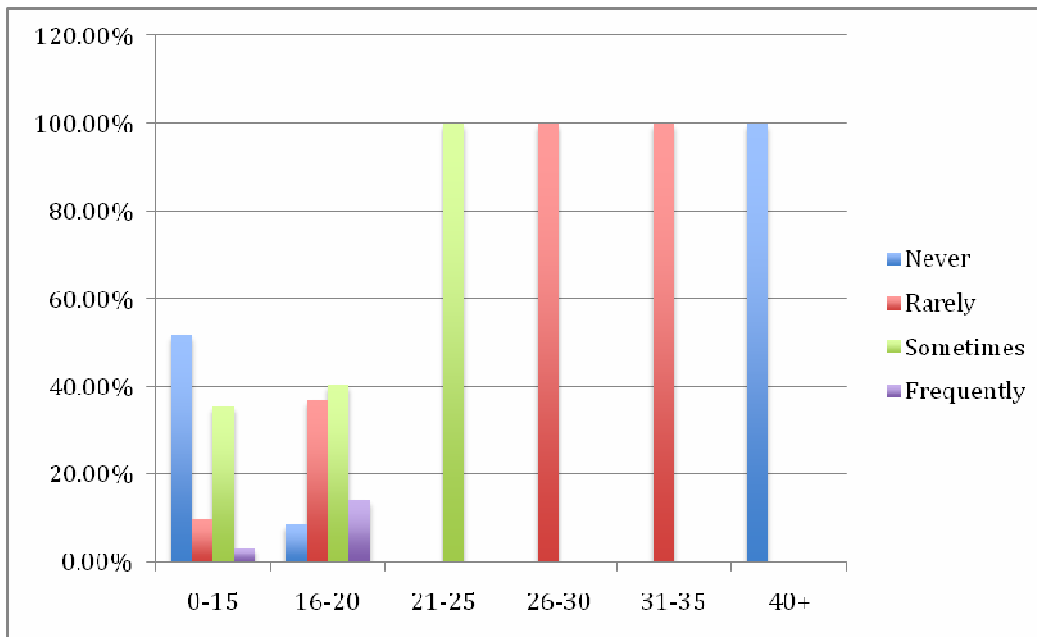


Chart 4

Looking at the table (see Appendix II) and the graph, we can see that the age group that uses Verlan most “frequently” is the 16-20 year olds (14.03%); additionally, more 21-25 year olds use Verlan “sometimes” than any other age group (100.00%). I was only able to obtain results from one or two participants in the 26-30, 31-35 and 40+ age categories, but as is visible on the chart, the 40+ year olds claimed to “never” use Verlan, whilst those between 26-35 years rated their usage as “rare”. Additionally, 10-15 year olds did not appear to be keen Verlan speakers, with 51.61% saying they “never” used it.

To better understand why this might be the case, let us look at the reasons the participants gave for using Verlan, if indeed they did speak it from time to time (and indeed not all participants did respond to this question; many

that did also gave more than one reason for their employment of Verlan). Again, the results tables can be found in Appendix II; the corresponding graph is below.

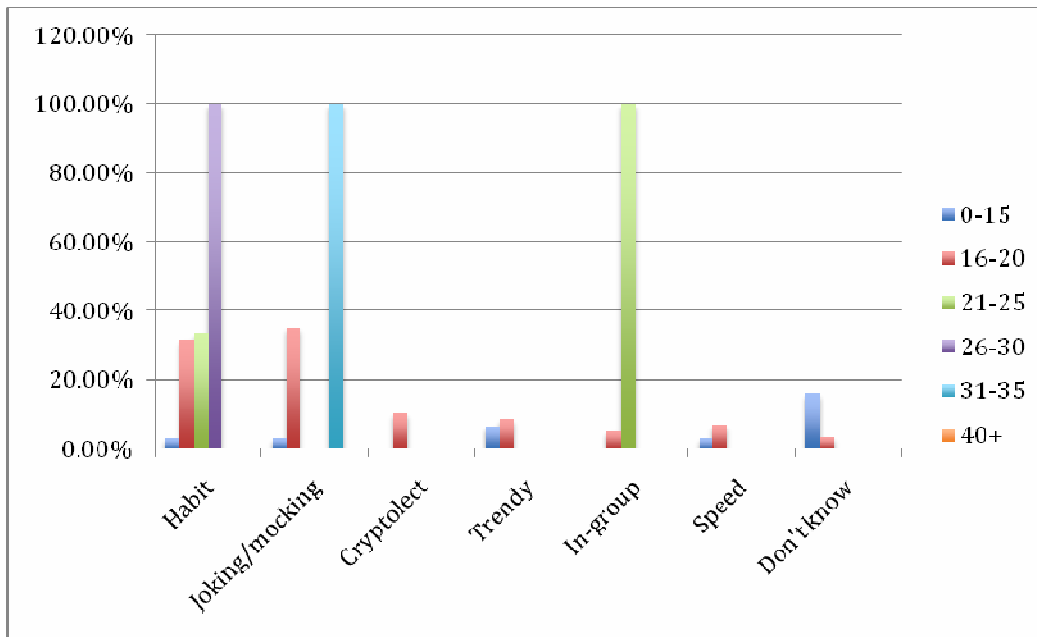


Chart 5

So, it is now more evident that each age group apparently has a different reason for their employment of Verlan in casual speech. Amongst the younger participants, they tended not to know why they used Verlan, and those that did mainly did so because they believed it was “cool” or “trendy” (6.45%), but as most of the 10-15 year olds questioned never used Verlan, it was difficult to gauge if there was one real reason as to why they spoke it. It was a different story for the 16-20 year olds, who again spoke Verlan for a variety of reasons, but more often than not it was out of habit (through constantly hearing more common *verlanisations*), or with the intention of mocking the *racailles* that spoke it (31.58% and 35.09% respectively). The responses from the 21-25 year olds were interesting; according to the literature, Verlan had its “heyday” in the late 1980s and 1990s (and so precisely when this age group was growing up), making their own employment of Verlan to “fit in” or as an in-group language all the more pertinent. Finally, the one respondent over the age of thirty used

Verlan “pour rigoler avec mon mari”⁵. These responses could lead one to believe that, while people who grew up while Verlan was still somewhat of a new phenomenon tend to use Verlan more seriously, as it were, other age groups consider it to be rather outdated and “uncool”, using it subconsciously as some terms slip into their everyday vocabulary. Another explanation could be that French youths, or at least those in Oyonnax, only become exposed to Verlan at a later age (for example, when they are old enough to appreciate hip-hop and rap music, or understand the cultural significance of films like *La Haine*), and so start consciously using it during their late teens and early twenties.

To further back up this theory, I wanted to look at any prejudices that those questioned had, or thought other people had, against Verlan. The results are as follows;

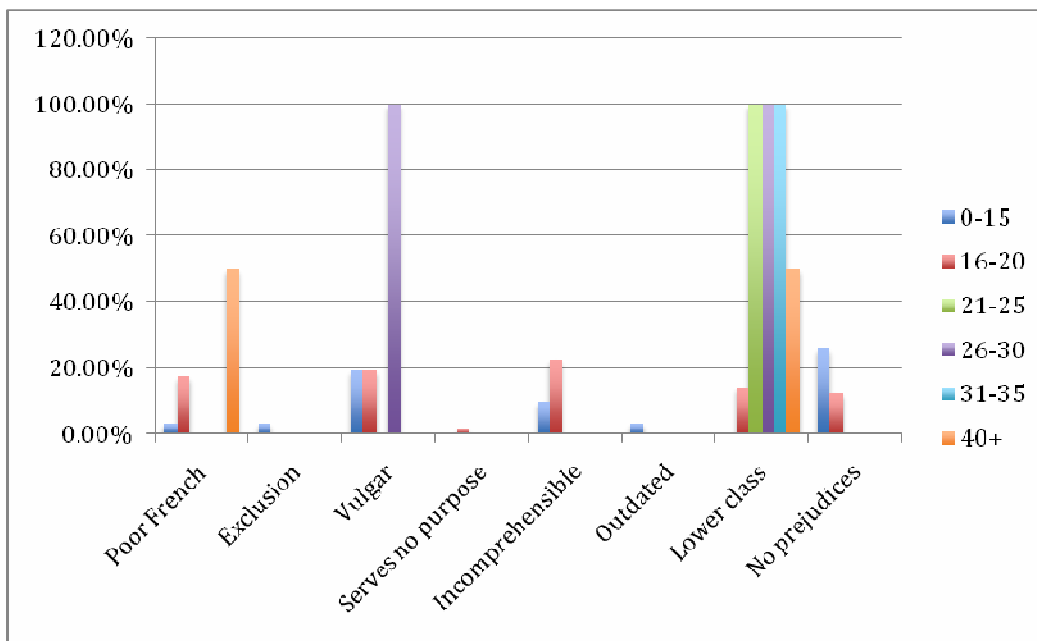


Chart 6

All age categories, bar the 10-15 year olds, showed some awareness of the negative connotations that Verlan might have with regards to the association with the lower classes and the French *banlieues* (particularly the 21-25 year olds and above, which reinforces what I mentioned previously about that age group’s

⁵ “To joke about with my husband.”

“in-group” usage of Verlan; the younger respondents were most likely not quite old enough to be socially aware of such things). Some of the older age groups expressed distaste for Verlan with respect to its reputation as being somewhat vulgar, or just generally poor French; all the 26-30 year olds asked perceived it to be vulgar, while half the 40+ year olds thought that it showed ignorance towards the French language. Just over a quarter of the 10-15 year olds quite innocently opined that there were no prejudices against speakers of Verlan. Whether or not this is the case is something that needs to be further investigated; either they are not yet aware of such things due to their age, or Verlan really does have no cultural importance in this day and age.

One final aspect worth examining was what type of words the subjects would be most likely to use the *verlanised* form of (i.e. a standard French term such as *homme* “man”, or the slang equivalent *mec*). As mentioned in chapter 3, they were presented with pairs of lexical variables and asked to mark which, if any, they would *verlanise*;

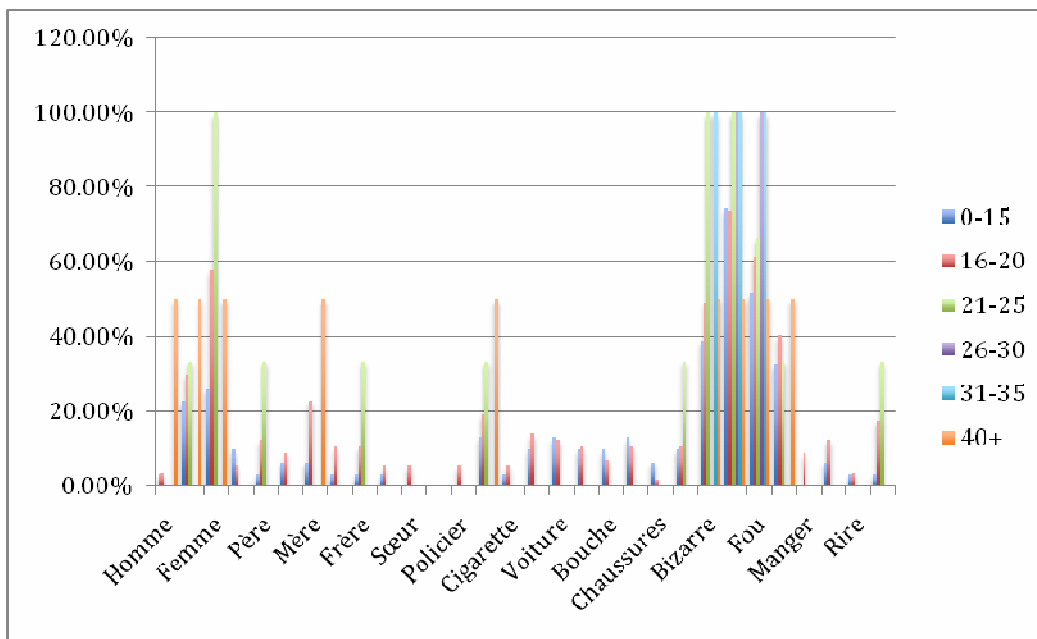


Chart 7

Admittedly, the graph does not show a huge amount of variation between the types of words that the different age groups would *verlanise*; a large number of participants across all age ranges *verlanised* *femme* (into *meuf*), *bizarre* (*zarbi*), *louche* (*chélou*), *fou* (*ouf*) and *dingue* (*guedin*), suggesting that such words have been lexicalised into the French language (and thus adding new semantic meaning to the word in some contexts, normally in a slightly derogatory sense), or have at the very least become synonyms for the existing words. Other popular words *verlanised* were *mec* (into *keum*), *mère* (*reum*), *flic* (*keuf*) and *rigoler* (*goleri*).

Asking the participants outright if there were any other words they habitually *verlanised* yielded more conclusive results. Within the 10-25 years age bracket, terms suggested included *cousin/cousine*, *lourd*, *tomber*, *bisous*, all of which are relatively innocuous, generic terms (although *cousin* does come under the “family relations” category, see chapter 2). Results from the 16-20 and 21-25 years age groups were more specific; *niquer*, *black*, *prof*, *pute*, *famille*, *moche*, *honte*, *racaille*, *quartier*, *rap*, *defoncé* and *choper* all cropped up amongst others, but I consider these to be more important as they all either slightly offensive (*niquer* translates as the verb “to fuck”, *moche* means “ugly”, *racaille* is, as we have seen, “scum”, *choper* “to score”, with a girl or with drugs, and *honte* means “shame”) or can be associated with life in the *banlieues*, for example *black*, *quartier* (a synonym for *banlieue* or *la zone*) and *défoncé* (“stoned”)⁶. The fact that the older participants *verlanise* such words, rather than generic terms, shows that they have a greater understanding of Verlan’s original cryptolectal and identity marking purpose.

4.2 Discussion of other non-numerical data

⁶ The *verlanisations* of these words, respectively, are: *zinc/zincou*, *rélou*, *béton*, *zoubi*, *kéni*, *kebla*, *frop*, *teupu*, *mifa*, *cheum*, *tehon*, *caillera*, *tiéquar*, *peur*, *fonsdé* and *pécho*; from *Le Dictionnaire de la Zone*.

Some participants gave particularly interesting responses, which in many cases either proved or disproved the perceived stereotypes of Verlan speakers⁷. One participant, a male who falls in the 21-25 years age band, takes a particular interest in the topic. When asked what the word “Verlan” made him think of, rather than simply listing *verlanised* words, he instead answers with *quartier, Paris, jeune* and *hip hop*. A Verlan speaker himself, he uses this mode of speech to fit in with his peers, and also out of habit; some words are so commonly *verlanised* that they are used more than the original form in casual speech (for example, *meuf* instead of *femme*). In discussing how Verlan words have become more widespread in recent years, he claims “ma mere n’a aucune raison de parler le verlan (génération, personnes fréquentées...). Avec le temps, elle sort des mots verlan de temps en temps, à force de m’avoir “fréquenté””⁸. He believes some people are prejudiced against the employment of Verlan in speech as it originally started off as *le langage des cités*, but these days it is much more common.

Two teachers, one female (31-35 years) and one male (40+ years) share similar views on the preconceptions of Verlan. The female admits to using it herself from time to time, as a joke with her husband, but says that for her, “c’est une language de jeunes, voire même “de jeunes de la cité””⁹, backing up the original argument that Verlan is a cryptolect very much restricted to the *banlieues* of France. The male teacher never uses Verlan, for the same reason as the female teacher, but adds that it is seen as a “langue des jeunes mal éduqués...une dégradation, une altération du français”¹⁰.

A female student in the 16-20 years age category fits the stereotype of a Verlan speaker perfectly; she is high school student, an Algerian national whose mother tongue is Arabic, from a lower- or working- class background (deduced

⁷ At this point I would like to add that I have not edited the responses given in any way; any errors were unintentional on the part of the participant.

⁸ “My mother has no reason to speak Verlan (because of her generation, the people she frequents...). From time to time, she comes out with Verlan words, just because she’s “hung out” with me.”

⁹ “It’s young people’s speech, “youths from the estates”, even.”

¹⁰ “It’s the language of poorly educated young people...a degradation or a deterioration of French.”

as such due to the fact that the occupation of only one parent is given, prompting us to believe that the other parent is unemployed, or she lives in a single parent household. The occupation cited is “shopkeeper” or “trader”). However, she claims she never uses Verlan, but does not divulge why this is the case. Possibly her non-usage can be accredited to her gender (as aforementioned, some girls avoid using Verlan as they believe it is a male phenomenon, see chapter 2.2), or perhaps she wants to distance herself from the prejudices and stereotypes that arise from use of Verlan. Another girl from the same age group and a similar background (another native Arabic speaker, but this time the subject in question is a Moroccan national), is rather proud of her ethnic roots, stating “[j]e parlerais toujours ma langue maternelle car c’est important”¹¹. The girl speaks Verlan, but despite her sense of identity, she does not use it as a means to assert her status as a Moroccan national; rather, she claims to use it as it is faster than standard French. As far as prejudices go, she does not mention anything about *la zone* or *les banlieues*, instead saying that some believe it corrupts the French language.

Another female, again falling in the 16-20 years age group, admits to using Verlan terms quite frequently. Interestingly, she is a French national but has Polish and Italian parents, and is encouraged to speak English in the family home to improve her language skills. Her reasons for using Verlan fit in well with its cryptological and ludic functions; she apparently speaks it with her friends as “c’est une façon de parler de ce que l’on veut sans que personne nous reconnaisse...[p]ersonne ne peut comprendre”¹². Nonetheless, she also observes that Verlan is quite frequently spoken by *racailles*. Another participant who employs Verlan as a cryptolect is a high school student who speaks Kabyle (a Berber language quite common in Algeria) as his first language (“...pour que seul les personnes auxquelles on s’adresse comprennent”¹³), but unlike the previously mentioned female student, he opines that Verlan may be frowned

¹¹ “I would always speak my native language as it’s very important.”

¹² “It’s a way of speaking about whatever we want without other people recognizing...nobody understands us.”

¹³ “...so that only the people we are speaking to can understand us.”

upon as “[à] force de vivre dans une société basée sur l’image, les gens pensent que tout ce qui est nouveau est mauvais, dont le verlan”¹⁴.

Finally, another male high school student expresses his distaste for Verlan, shrugging it off as “un étrange façon de s’exprimer, un phénomène de mode”¹⁵. Like the aforementioned Arabic girl, one might expect this particular student to speak Verlan; while he is a French national, both parents are Cape Verdean, and his and their native tongue is Cape Verdean Creole. In addition to this, his parents are both manual labourers (an electrician and a worker in a local factory), and so could be placed in the “lower- or working- class” social category. His views on Verlan, and those of the female Algerian participant, could give strength to the argument that the perceived functions of Verlan as an in-group language are changing over time.

4.3 A note on the recordings

Unfortunately, in the end, the data obtained from the recordings was not of a high enough quality to merit being included in the study. Although it had been previously stated that the physical distance between the participants and myself would be conducive to eliciting the most natural speech possible (see chapter 3.3.2), it eventually became somewhat of a hindrance as some volunteers had difficulty in sending the audio files (one such conversation, recorded by a 16 year old girl and her friends, became distorted when she tried to send it via e-mail). Of the conversations that I did manage to obtain, one (a French-Portuguese family) sounded rather unnatural; not so much in the way that they were speaking, rather in that one of the interlocutors had brought up the subject of Verlan, so any Verlan terms used were given as an example, instead of occurring naturally in speech.

¹⁴ “because we live in a society based on image, people think that everything new is bad, and Verlan is a part of this.”

¹⁵ “a strange way to express oneself, a bit of a trendy phenomenon.”

5. Concluding remarks

To reiterate, it is apparent that in this study, age is the most prominent factor when it comes to variation in the application of Verlan. As we saw above, Verlan use is more common and conscientious amongst 16-25 year olds; younger Oyonnaxiens do use it with varying frequencies, but tend not to know why (presumably through imitating older speakers), and so with no obvious awareness of outside preconceptions. Members of the local community over the age of 30 rarely, if ever, speak Verlan, and do so ironically, being familiar with the implicatures of its employment. Whether or not this means that the functions of Verlan (as a cryptolect and as an identity marker) have progressed as it has become more widespread in society is unknown; it could also be an age-related phenomenon, meaning that Verlan is actually more of an adolescent phase, a lexicon which speakers only start using once they become aware of it. The fact that Oyonnax is such a small, isolated town would probably point to the former explanation; the lack of outside influences would mean that any mode of speech would infiltrate almost all sections of the local community, and any specific usages would quickly be lost. Additionally, some of the responses from the 10-15 year olds, claiming that they thought Verlan was *démodé* ("old-fashioned"), back up the claim that its perceived usage is changing over time. Oyonnax and its inhabitants would definitely merit further study, possibly in real time if it were feasible, to deduce whether or not this is actually the case.

The other variables, namely gender, ethnic background and social class, did also show differences in the reasons for using and prejudices against Verlan; a more profound study on the topic would be necessary to confirm this outright, but from looking at the above results we can tentatively claim that in Oyonnax, Verlan is most prominent amongst young (below the age of 30), middle class males of *maghrébin* stock. If this turned out to be true, it would mean that the hypothesis I put forward in chapter 3.2 would be proved correct.

Some words in the Verlan lexicon have become so much a part of everyday vocabulary that some Oyonnaxien speakers are no longer aware of the fact that they are speaking them, or use them freely without any of the original

implications being intended. As previously mentioned, the Verlan terms which cropped up the most frequently were *mec*, *meuf*, *keuf*, *zarbi*, *chélou*, *ouf*, *guedin* and *goleri*.

Some of the problems which arose during the data collection process (more notably with the recordings and obtaining data from a wider cross-section of the population) meant that the results obtained probably were not as accurate as they could have been; I believe this study provides the basis for further fieldwork to be carried out in Oyonnax, preferably first hand this time, to gain a more in-depth understanding of contemporary Verlan usage.

APPENDIX I : Sample questionnaire

Pour ceux qui ne me connaissent pas, je m'appelle Beckie Stewart, et j'étais assistante de la langue anglaise aux lycées Arbez Carme et Xavier Bichat l'année dernière. Cette année, je suis rentrée en Angleterre pour finir mes études, et je suis en train d'écrire une thèse sur l'utilisation du verlan dans la région. Ca m'aiderait beaucoup si vous pouvez prendre quelques minutes pour remplir ce questionnaire pour que je puisse plus comprendre ce phénomène! Le questionnaire est anonyme, il ne faut pas me donner votre nom, mais s'il reste des questions à lesquelles vous préférez ne pas répondre, ce n'est pas de problème.

Merci en avance pour votre aide!!

Sexe:

M ?
F ?

Age:

10-15 ?
16-20 ?
21-25 ?
26-30 ?
31-35 ?
36-40 ?
40+ ?

Nationalité:

Langue maternelle:

Métier (ou, en cas des étudiants, métier de vos parents):

Avant de vous poser des questions sur le verlan, quand vous entendez le mot "verlan", de quels mots penseriez vous?

Est-ce que vos parents viennent d'un pays étranger, ou vous parlez une autre langue à la maison? Si oui, est-ce que vous pouvez me donner plus d'informations?

Parlez-vous le verlan? Si oui, dans quelles situations (en parlant ou en écrivant) et avec qui?

Pourquoi exactement parlez-vous le verlan?

Y a-t-il certains préjugés contre ceux qui parlent le verlan, ou est-il vu comme une bonne chose? Pourquoi?

De cette liste de mots, lesquels seriez-vous plus tenté de changer en forme verlan?

Homme	Clope
Mec	Voiture
Femme	Bagnole
Nana	Bouche
Père	Gueule
Papa	Chaussures
Mère	Pompes
Maman	Bizarre
Frère	Louche
Frangin	Fou
Sœur	Dingue
Sœurette	Manger
Policier	Bouffer
Flic	Rire
Cigarette	Rigoler

Y a-t-il les autres mots qui sont fréquemment verlanisés?

APPENDIX II Tables of data concerning age of participants

Table 5: Frequency of Verlan usage in relation to age

	10-15		16-20		21-25		26-30		31-35		40+	
Never	16	51.61%	5	8.77%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	2	100.00%
Rarely	3	9.68%	21	36.84%	0	0.00%	1	100.00%	1	100.00%	0	0.00%
Sometimes	11	35.48%	23	40.35%	3	100.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Frequently	1	3.23%	8	14.03%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Total	31	100.00%	57	100.00%	3	100.00%	1	100.00%	1	100.00%	2	100.00%

Table 6: Reasons for Verlan usage in relation to age

	10-15		16-20		21-25		26-30		31-35		40+	
Habit	1	3.23%	18	31.58%	1	33.33%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Joking/Mocking	1	3.23%	20	35.09%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	100.00%	0	0.00%
Cryptolect	0	0.00%	6	10.53%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
“Trendy”	2	6.45%	5	8.78%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
In-group	0	0.00%	3	5.26%	3	100.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
For speed	1	3.23%	4	7.02%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Don't know	5	16.13%	2	3.51%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%

Table 7: Prejudices against Verlan usage in relation to age

	10-15		16-20		21-25		26-30		31-35		40+	
Poor French	1	3.23%	10	17.54%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	50.00%
Exclusion	1	3.23%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Vulgar	6	19.35%	11	19.30%	0	0.00%	1	100.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
No purpose	0	0.00%	1	1.75%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Incomprehensible	3	9.68%	7	22.58%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Outdated	1	3.23%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Lower class	0	0.00%	8	14.04%	3	100.00%	1	100.00%	0	0.00%	1	50.00%
No prejudices	8	25.81%	7	12.28%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	100.00%	0	0.00%

Table 8: Tendency to verlanise certain words in relation to age

	10-15		16-20		21-25		26-30		31-35		40+	
Homme	1	3.23%	2	3.51%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	
Mec	7	22.58%	17	29.82%	1	33.33%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	
Femme	8	25.81%	33	57.89%	3	100.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	
Nana	3	9.68%	3	5.26%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Père	1	3.23%	7	12.28%	1	33.33%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Papa	2	6.45%	5	8.77%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Mère	2	6.45%	13	22.81%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	100.00%
Maman	1	3.23%	6	10.53%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Frère	1	3.23%	6	10.53%	1	33.33%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Frangin	1	3.23%	3	5.26%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Sœur	0	0.00%	3	5.26%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Sœurette	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Policier	0	0.00%	3	5.26%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%

Flic	4	12.90%	11	19.30%	1	33.33%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	100.00%
Cigarette	1	3.23%	3	5.26%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Clope	3	9.68%	8	14.04%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Voiture	4	12.90%	7	12.28%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Bagnole	3	9.68%	6	10.53%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Bouche	3	9.68%	4	7.02%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Gueule	4	12.90%	6	10.53%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Chaussures	2	6.45%	1	1.75%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Pompes	3	9.68%	6	10.53%	1	33.33%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Bizarre	12	38.71%	28	49.12%	3	100.00%	0	0.00%	1	100.00%	1	100.00%
Louche	23	74.19%	42	73.68%	3	100.00%	1	100.00%	1	100.00%	1	100.00%
Fou	16	51.61%	35	61.40%	2	66.67%	1	100.00%	1	100.00%	1	100.00%
Dingue	10	32.36%	23	40.35%	1	33.33%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	1	100.00%
Manger	0	0.00%	5	8.77%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Bouffer	2	6.45%	7	12.28%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Rire	1	3.23%	2	3.51%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%
Rigoler	1	3.23%	10	17.54%	1	33.33%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%	0	0.00%