

## Dodging Standard French: Linguistic perspectives on *le langage de la banlieue* in *L'Esquive*

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This chapter looks at the French *langage de la banlieue* (outer city) from a sociolinguistic perspective. Frequently perceived and described as inferior to the standard variety of French, *le langage de la banlieue* is fascinating in many ways, as it is innovative and systematic as a language in general, and it is also considered to be the main object of an identity within a particular underprivileged social context. This variation of Standard French, which is commonly associated with immigrants living in suburban areas surrounding Paris and other major cities in France, presents interesting linguistic alterations. The differences of this vernacular, often influenced by the multilingualism and multiculturalism of its speakers, can be observed at the phonological, lexical, morphological and syntactical levels; even though the lexicon appears to undergo the most modifications. Certain features of this French sociolect are understood and also frequently used by French speakers who do not belong to the *banlieusard* (project-dwellers) speech community. The media in general, and particularly the movie industry, have been identified as one of the reasons behind this phenomenon.

To illustrate this trend, this chapter provides an analysis of the language used by the main characters in Kechiche Cesars's winning film *L'Esquive* (2003), which takes place in *la banlieue*.

It is in *la banlieue* that new linguistic norms have developed in the last decade and continue to evolve and partially infiltrate the rest of French society. Kechiche and other film producers of the same genre (i.e. Kassovitz; Richet; Chapiro; Genest) excel at presenting a current and realistic discourse within the *cit * (housing project). The main character Abdelkrim (aka: Krime) and his classmates illustrate the colorful use of this informal way of speaking, which ultimately dissociates them from typical French speakers. The ability of *cit * youth to code-switch registers (*langage de la banlieue*-Standard French) in various situations and with different interlocutors also reflects their knowledge of ‘good’ French, which they purposely avoid when negotiating their identity that has clear linguistic foundations. I will present the linguistic complexity of this French variation and then question the social consequences of using such a language variation for these teenagers.

The French language has experienced several important periods of linguistic changes (i.e. *La Renaissance* or *Le Classicisme*). The creation of the French Academy in 1635 has had a tremendous impact on maintaining a *bon usage* of the French language. This notion has been preserved throughout history particularly since the French Revolution (1789), when French was considered to be the cement of national unity and equality as well as the pillar of an all-inclusive state (Judge 39). Later, the rejection of regional and local languages such as *patois* is a revealing illustration of the elitism associated with the French language. As Posner explains: “French is not a question of genetics but cultural allegiance” (48). Today, the consequences of this frame of mind are still alive as immigrants wishing to integrate into French society are expected to use Standard French language as a reflection of appropriate cultural behavior and as a tool for promoting their own integration and equality (Fagyal, “Rhythm types”; Judge). Orlando explained that: “The right to be different and recognition of ethnic specificity present some tough sociopolitical challenges for France’s republican ideals” (397). According to Blatt (2007), in this model, integration is viewed as a process by which individuals subordinate their

origins and accept membership in a unitary-state, which overcame incongruence.

The importance of using this standard language has also lived through the domination of English and the evolution of technology and communication means. The Loi Bas-Lauriol of 1975 aimed at protecting French citizens by giving them the right to be informed in their mother tongue and to avoid the use of English in particular contexts, such as advertising (Judge 45). Subsequently, in 1994, the Loi Toubon was another attempt to further and more effectively protect French consumers; however, Judge explained that by the mid-nineties, peoples' opinion to exclude foreign words from advertisement or media had changed. The French recognized the importance of technological neologisms and the press started to actively mock this law by speculating about the arrest of journalists if they ever used an English word in an article. In the following years, "linguists and non-linguists stopped viewing French as the fortress capable of being defended by protectionist linguistic policies" (Judge 47).

Today, many French speakers still favor the use of Standard French as they recognize the power of language as a way of defining and validating their intellectual and educational backgrounds, which ultimately shape their identity. Despite this inclination, more and more French speakers are bi-dialectal and frequently include non-standard varieties in their everyday speech, revealing some of their geographical origins, social affiliations or educational background.

The objective of this chapter is to analyze the linguistic richness of the *langage de la banlieue* or *langue contemporaine des cités* and simultaneously provide illustrations of this variety of French used by the main characters of Kechiche's film *L'Esquive*, to emphasize how these variations are associated with this suburban speech community and easily converges with other social groups. I first discuss the social motivation for the development of this cryptic dialect of French and then continue with a brief description of *banlieue* films and how they have been a platform for *le langage de la*

*banlieue* to become more visible and influential in the francophone world. I then analyze specific linguistic characteristics of the *cité* French as used by the main protagonists in *L'Esquive* and also discuss the impact of using such a segregationist language variation.

### **Banlieue French**

Language variations have always been fascinating, as they are intriguing in many ways. Billiez and Trimaille explained that the *langage de la banlieue* is no exception. Starting in the mid 70s and motivated by North American sociolinguistics investigations (see for instance Labov, 1972), immigrants' language became a central topic of investigation. Fagygal explained that the youths living in impoverished *banlieues* often make the headlines for 'inventing a new way of speaking French' ("Prosodic consequences" 92), which is not surprising as Eckert & Rickford (2001) posited that adolescence is a coming age of full sociolinguistic competence. Fagygal further argues that teenagers in multi-ethnic working-class suburbs have been portrayed as the "movers and shakers" of language change in French ("Rhythm types" 91).

This urban sociolect is the result of the need for linguistic freedom of the 20th century and is also the language typically associated with the immigrants who live in the suburbs of Paris and other large French cities, and who usually belong to the lower/working class (Fievet & Podhorna-Policka). Fievet & Podhorna-Policka pointed out that naming this quotidian speech provoked polemics as soon as it was identified as a legitimate variation of Standard French; from *français véhiculaire interethnique* (Billiez, 1992) to *parlers des jeunes urbains* (Trimaille, 2004) or *langue des cités* (Boyer, 1997). This language was initially a secret code that was known to a limited number of speakers. It was mainly used by groups to shape their identity, dissociate themselves from the rest of the French society and to express themselves freely in front of authority figures (parents or the police) to discuss specific topics such as drug trafficking.

Nowadays, with the impact of popular media such as hip hop music, rai and in our case *Beur* and *banlieue* cinema, this language is not only associated with certain groups from the Parisian region,

but also with people of different classes, ages and from other parts of the country, particularly French white youth who view the *banlieue* sociolect as cool (Orlando) or as Lefkowitz (1989) explains, as a way to: “affirm their ties with their low income brothers and sisters by deliberately adopting their speech patterns” (“Verlan: Talking Backwards in French” 319). Boyer similarly noted that such urban vernaculars have a tendency to get diffused outside their initial restricted group and spread to non-immigrants whose social legitimacy is not questioned, and for whom this language is purely a sign of being linguistically savvy and trendy. Indeed, some words spread so much that they have been added to renowned printed (*le Petit Robert*) or online dictionaries (*Dictionnaire de la Zone*),<sup>1</sup> which include contemporary argot and verlan words (i.e. Keum—mec (*guy*) or keuf—flic (*police*)) as they are considered as part of spoken French. Podhorna-Policka (2007) refers to these types of high frequency lexical items as *mots identitaires*, as they allow speakers to dissociate themselves from other speech communities, while also indicating an affiliation with a particular generational group and are passively known by the majority of young French (Fievet & Podhorna-Policka).

## **Linguistic characteristics and illustrations of *le langage de la banlieue* in *l'Esquive***

### **BANLIEUE FILMS**

Movie scripts of “*banlieue*-films,” as identified by the famous French revue *les cahiers du cinéma* (<http://www.cahiersducinema.com/>), are considered to be a concrete representation of spoken French, even though the screenplay cannot be fully compared to spontaneous language; it is assumed that screenwriters attempt to make their characters speak in a natural way that resemble as much as possible current authentic discursive trends (Fievet & Podhorna-Policka). Assuming the hypothesis that contemporary French cinema reflects not only the evolution of society, but also language variation, it is interesting to see how *le langage de la banlieue* is used in *L'Esquive*. Mathieu Kassovitz was the first

French producer to dare making a “*banlieue*-film,” focusing on multiethnic, delinquent immigrant youths, their daily activities and fights with the rest of the society. This social and politically engaged cinema (Chibane & Chibane) tries to denounce the inequalities and injustice of *la banlieue*. In order to appropriately represent the social divide between the *banlieusards* and the rest of the French society, the language the main characters use is one essential aspect of their life that illustrates the social (linguistic) diversity that exists in France. For the projection of *La Haine*, the audience was given a glossary to facilitate comprehension, as this language was initially foreign to most French speaking person not living in such neighborhoods. Since *La Haine*, the *langage de la banlieue* is more commonly used in films, on television and other media and is consequently more commonly understood.

Contrary to *La Haine*, *L'Esquive* does not expose the harsh reality of urban culture focusing on the violence and anger that resides in the *banlieue*. Instead it characterizes a subtle and original human portrait of young multiethnic individuals. Most teenagers portrayed in Kechiche's movie are North Africans and Muslims living in Seine-Saint-Denis, a community known to be ostracized and stigmatized by French society. Set during the school rehearsals of a classic of the 18th century theatre Marivaux play *Le Jeu de l'amour et du hasard* (The Game of Love and Chance), the film captures the mixed feelings of adolescents, focusing on the developing romance between two friends; Krimo and Lydia. Early in the movie, Krimo, a shy Maghrebi, realizes he has fallen in love with his long-time friend Lydia. In order to spend more time with the sassy blond and get closer to her, Krimo bribes his friend Rachid to take his place in the lead role of Arlequin, the play they will present at the end of the school year festival. To sum up: “Rejection, seduction, betrayal, and love are the heart of this universal coming-of-age story” ([www.lovefilm.com](http://www.lovefilm.com)).

Screenwriters (i.e. Chapiron, 2006; Kassovitz, 1995) have been typically using the *parlers des jeunes urbains* as an emblem of the youths to emphasize the social opposition between different characters; however, the originality of the French-Tunisian director Kechiche

is to blend different forms of language and registers produced by the same speakers. In other words, Krimeo, Lydia and their acting classmates alternate the modern non-standard *langage de la cité*, Standard French (with their parents, school teachers and other authoritative figures such as the police) and the written classical French with its eloquent wordiness and grammatical complexity required to act out the Marivaux play. Kechiche's play on words starts with the title of his movie itself. "*L'Esquive*" (dodge), symbolizes the link between the types of French variation used in the script. This word is used in the play and also in the contemporary *banlieue* in its verlanized version "j'ai vesqui et voilà, c'est tout" says Lydia to her friend Nanou towards the end of the movie as she explains her romantic indecision towards Krimeo who asked her out. The romance between the two *banlieusards* echoes the plot of the play they are rehearsing. Marivaux's character, Arlequin, falls for Lisette just as Krimeo falls for Lydia. The teens in the film, which has the realistic feel of a documentary, speak among themselves *le langage de la banlieue*, but what are the specific linguistic characteristics of this French variation? This language defines who they are in many ways and as Planchenault points out, the cultural identity of social groups is largely based on their lexicon, as well as phonological and discursive forms that they commonly use, as analyzed in the following section.

#### LINGUISTIC OVERVIEW

The *langage de la banlieue* has been described as creative, colorful and expressive because of its many distinct original and systematic linguistic characteristics, especially at the lexical level. As Faygal noted, this is not specific to youth slang: "*Le lexique constitue sans doute l'aspect linguistique le mieux connu des parlers populaires en France*" ("Action des Medias" 41). Faygal's claim is not surprising as many of the variations of *le langage de la banlieue* are lexically based; however, this language variation also presents some phonological distinctive features and a few syntactical variations (Planchenault; Sourdot; Valdman, "Comment gérer la variation") as described below.



### LEXICAL VARIATIONS

This suburban way of speaking contains a plethora of lexical variations. New vocabulary is used in specific contexts and situations. Neologisms are often created by semantic modifications (i.e., new meanings of already existing words, metaphors and metonymies), some resulted from other formal linguistic processes (i.e., truncation, resuffixation). Others result from a play on syllable (*verlan*) or borrowing. Using a corpus from the dictionary *Tchatche de banlieue* (1998), Duchêne established that typically, *le langage de la banlieue* is composed of 69% of these types of created lexical items. She further elaborated her analysis and identified that the *langage téci* (Doran, 2005) also includes a variety of imported words from various languages (African languages 0.5%, American English 2.5%, Arabic 3.5% and Romani languages 3.5%) and *verlan* (18%) and finally *veul* (1.5%).

Many words uttered in *L'Esquive* are the result of one of these linguistic phenomena. In several instances Krimo and his friends use borrowings from the foreign languages listed above. The Arabic saying 'Insh Allah' (God willing) is frequently used by Lydia, which is initially surprising coming out of the mouth of this blond, fair skinned young girl whose family is certainly not from the Maghreb region. However, given that this Arabic saying is typically used in this suburban speech community, it is particularly important for Lydia to clearly establish herself in the community by frequently using such a phrase despite her Caucasian origins.

Another Arabic lexical item is the verb *kiffer*, which is also commonly uttered by teenagers in these suburbs. This word comes from *kef* meaning 'bag' and referring to the bag needed to transform cannabis leaves in hashish. Subsequently, the word *kif* was used in Arabic to describe the sensation of pleasure and bliss experienced following the intake of hashish. In French, the verb *kiffer* does not strictly refer to this specific pleasure, but is associated with the liking of any persons, hobbies, or objects. Given the main plot of the movie being a romantic coming-of-age tale, discussions around Krimo 'kissing' Lydia and vice versa are rather frequent.



Despite the important role of the English language in *banlieue* (Duchêne) French, none is heard in *L'Esquive*. Orlando explained that American English proliferates in French rap; however, this music of choice among the urban youth is not featured in Kechiche's movie.

As Billiez and Trimaille pointed out, numerous metaphoric expressions as semantic variations are present in French vernaculars, such as in *le langage de la banlieue* (i.e.: *ça cloche*—something is wrong). These types of linguistic variations can be observed throughout *L'Esquive*. As Lakoff and Johnson explained, metaphors are culturally based; therefore, they are unique not only to each language, but to each sociolect linked to a specific subculture, in this case, *la banlieue*. In the opening scene, spectators are presented with an animated interaction between Krimo's friends who use the expression *t'es chaud* repetitively. The latter is not used in its literal meaning -you're hot-, but rather means -are you up for a fight-. *Tu me saoules* (literally: you are making me feel drunk- you are driving me insane) is another popular metaphor in vernacular French that Lydia uses when she argues with Magali to express her feelings. There are many additional examples of comparable semantic variations in Kechiche's movie; however this chapter does not aim to simply focus on one type of linguistic variation, but rather understand the many systematic differences that make this sociolect so interesting.

Suffixation is also a common linguistic phenomenon used to create new words, as illustrated in the following example:

(1) *cloch* + *-ard* = *clochard* (beggar)

In example (1) the word *clochard* is formed of the root morpheme *cloch-* and the derivational morpheme *-ard*, which is a rather productive suffix in French implying a pejorative connotation used to qualify people. In the movie, Lydia uses this particular derivational suffix to negatively refer to Krimo as a *crevard* (weedy) after he asked her for the ten Euros he lent her earlier. This adjective formed on the base of the verb *crever* (to croak) has a

derogatory tone partially produced by the vernacular nature of the verb itself, but also reinforced with the suffix *-ard*.

Various types of truncations are also commonly used in the *banlieue* vernacular. Speakers often shorten or abbreviate multisyllabic words to produce apocopes (loss of one or more sounds at the end) as in example (2) or apheresis (loss of one or more sounds at the beginning) as in (3). In addition, speakers often create neologisms, which results from a truncation and resuffixation as illustrated in example (4). This linguistic feature is also frequently used in standard oral French. Finally, the *langage de la banlieue* has also words, which have been truncated and then reduplicated as in examples (5).

(2) *mythomane* – *mytho* (mythomaniac)

(3) *autobus* – *bus* (bus)

(4) *clochard* – *clodo* (hobo)

(5) *dormir* – *dodo* (to sleep)

It is important to note that suffixation or truncations are not linguistic phenomena that are exclusively associated with *le langage de la banlieue*, but rather with vernacular and informal French in general.

Meanwhile, foul language is an integral part of youthful vernacular, which according to Stapleton, typically carries connotations of lower socioeconomic culture. As Trimaille and Billiez pointed out, vulgar language is rather preminent and cussing appears to be understood within this particular community of practice,<sup>2</sup> and in fact, offers additional opportunities for its members to define their identities. In the first scene of the movie, a group of teenage boys uses a variety of insults that revolve around the word *pute*—prostitute in French. They alternatively refer to another group of thugs as *filz de putes* (sons of a bitch) but interestingly, one of Krimo's friends also makes reference to his own mates saying: "*vous faites les putes?*" Again, this word is used to refer to others in an aggressive way, but also to describe themselves and their affiliation with in a particular speech community, where swearing is expected and the norm. Defying many western cultural expectations, in the

following scene, a teenage girl, Magali (Krimo's ex-girlfriend) asks him aggressively: "*tu viens comme ça, tu crois que j'suis ta pute?*" She continues by calling him with a variety of obscenities: "*sale connard, va! Enculé, va!*" This suggests that gender is not a consideration in terms of using vulgar and foul language, in this case, expletives. Magali is no gender exception, as in a following scene, fellow *banlieusardes* Dina and Lydia, in a banal conversation, exchange a number of phrases containing cusswords such as "*tu t'en bats les couilles, putain de sa mère, oh l'enculé, putain j'lui aurais craché dans la gueule mon frère.*" Stapleton explained that swearing can be used for a variety of reasons, but it appears that Magali excels at denigrating another group, in this case 'men' in an attempt to strengthen her own gender status. On the other hand, the second example (Dina and Lydia's interaction) may be interpreted as an act of solidarity between women friends, as there is no animosity between the two friends. There are numerous additional scenes in which foul language is also used to express anger or fear, clearly establishing that it is the norm in *le langage de la banlieue*.

Another productive lexical variation in *le langage de la banlieue* is *verlan*. Using words that are formed by syllabic inversion is certainly not a new linguistic phenomenon. Merle explained that this type of word-formation process based on the inversion of syllables and segments within a word goes back several centuries. The first traces of *verlan* were identified at the end of the 16th century, after that, this type of play on words became somewhat infrequent until the beginning of the 20th century. As Lefkowitz ("Verlan: Talking Backwards in French") noted, in the late sixties, its usage became so widespread that it started infiltrating Standard French with the assistance of different famous French speakers; from the French President Mitterrand,<sup>3</sup> to the singer Renaud with his album *Laisse Béton*, to the film maker Claude Zidi and his film *Les Ripoux*. Lefkowitz's remark also highlights the importance of this language variation as it has obviously withstood the test of time and proven to be more than a fashionable phenomenon as it is still currently used by a variety of French speakers.

*Verlan* (backslang) is an argot in the form of language play

featuring inversion of syllables in a word and varies in complexity depending on the number of syllables contained in a specific word (Lefkowitz). *Verlan* is a way to put a certain emphasis on specific words or hide their meaning so that a sentence becomes incomprehensible. It rests on a long French tradition of transposing syllables of individual words to create slang words. The name *verlan* itself is an example: it is derived from inverting the syllables in *l'envers* and slightly adjusting the spelling (“the inverse,” pronounced *lan-ver*). These phonological variations are typically observed in content words (i.e. nouns, adjectives, adverbs and verbs); function words such as pronouns, prepositions or articles, however, remain unchanged. According to Lefkowitz, *verlan* is used in specific contexts, for instance when discussing subjects related to leisure and passions, topics about daily life, controversial and taboo issues (317). On the other hand, she explained that *verlan* is not used in formal settings, with authority figures or non-initiated interlocutors.

Many words of the *langage de la banlieue* are made of a simple inversion of monosyllabic words as in example 1 and disyllabic words in 2 below:

- (1) *fou – ouf* (crazy)
- (2) *cimer – merci* (thank you)

These types of verlanized words are frequently used not only by *banlieusards* but also by many other French speakers. In *L'Esquive* Krimo thanks his mother with the word *cimer—merci* (thanks) and she smiles back at him illustrating her understanding of this popular verlanized word. Later, Dina uses *chanmé-méchant* (mean), which is not only a word made of inverted syllable but also a semantic variation as she really means in this particular context that Lydia's new theatre dress looks great. It is indeed common for words to undergo several of the linguistics processes described above.

Some words have undergone several linguistic manipulations (i.e. spelling adjustment) to facilitate their pronunciation. For instance, after the initial inversion, a sound can be added to the end of certain words to ‘sound better’ as illustrated in example 3 and 4:

(3) *mec* – *keumé* (guy)

(4) *soeur* – *reusda* or *reusdé* (sister)

Both the words in (3) and (4) are used by the protagonists of *L'Esquive* throughout the movie.

Finally, *verlan* words can also delete their final vowel to make pronunciation logical as in example 5:

(5) *père* – *reupé* (dad)

*Verlan* is often compared to pig Latin, it is, however, actively spoken by certain speech community in France. Furthermore, because many *verlan* words have infiltrated Standard spoken French (Lefkowitz) and consequently lost their secretive status, they are often *revelanisés*. Words that have twice undergone syllables inversions are not called *verlan*, but *veul* as exemplified in (6).

(6) *Feumeu* – *meuf* – *femme* (*woman*)

Recently, Fievet noted that *verlanization* is still considered a productive identity marker, even though it is generally limited to one or two key words in the context of an interaction. *Verlan* words and expressions are typically mixed within a more general *argotique* language.

#### PHONOLOGICAL VARIATIONS

Besides lexical innovations, a few differences can be observed between the *langage téci* and Standard spoken French at the phonological level. The prosodic features present different characteristics than Standard oral French. Formal French is typically described as monotonous in terms of its intonation (Duchêne); however in informal speech the delivery is more rapid and vowel articulation is typically altered. Armstrong and Jamin explained a few important vowel features of *le langage de la banlieue*. For instance, Standard French has an open [ɔ] like in the word *sport* and a closed [o] like in the word *beau* (beautiful), which occur in different phonological environments. Namely, the open [ɔ] appears in closed syllables and the closed [o] in open syllables; however in a word like *police* a typical *banlieue* speaker would

pronounce it [polis] despite the fact that it appears in a closed syllable. In a similar vein, Standard French dissociates between the open [ɛ] and the closed [e]. A word such as *mère* would be pronounced with an open [ɛ] Standard French, but in the phrase *ta mère* (yo mama), it is pronounced [tameR]. This pronunciation can be heard by Krimo's friends in the opening scene of *L'Esquive*, in which they use a variety of expression that includes the words *ta mère* (i.e., *j'veais niquer sa mère, la vie de ma mère contre sa mère*). The popularity of these expressions has grown exponentially in the last decades and several websites have been created to list and discuss jokes with the phrase *ta mère* (<http://www.ta-mere.com/>).

As far as consonants, two major phenomena have been observed by Armstrong and Jamin. First, the glotalisation of the final [R] found in the phrase *ta mère* [tameRʔ] and the affrication of some occlusive consonants such as [p], [d], [k] as in the phrase : *J'veux dire que* (what I want to say is that). Cerquiglini (2000) further argued that consonants among Arabs immigrants in *la banlieue* become more explosive, feature exploited by many francophone rap musicians who have picked up this phonological characteristic. He explained that this phenomenon can be associated with the nativization of specific phonological features borrowed from French spoken by second generation immigrants from Maghreb, commonly known as *beurs* in France. Following a similar argument, Fagyal hypothesized that the Semitic languages of north-west Africa have a tendency towards vowel reduction and consequently language convergence could result in the alteration of the French pronunciation ("Rhythm Types"). The results of her empirical study confirmed substrate influence from the heritage language.

In addition, research has identified a peculiar prosody, which is associated with a shift of the accent to the penultimate and not the final syllable as in Standard French (Billiez; Conein & Gadet, 1998; Cerquiglini, 2001; Mela, 1997). However, Fagyal pointed out that none of these studies used the necessary acoustic data to support their claim ("Prosodic consequences"). In a subsequent investigation, Fagyal claimed that the lengthening of

the penultimate syllable also exists in other varieties of French and that it may be a characteristic of being part of the French working class, which is typically in contact with immigrants or composed of immigrants (“Rhythm Types”).

#### SYNTACTICAL VARIATIONS

Few differences have been identified at the syntactic level, but Sourdout and later Planchenault pointed out the change of syntactic category of the adjectives *grave* or *direct*, which are frequently used as adverbs in a phrase such as “*je le kiffe grave*” (I like him a lot) or “*tu le sais direct*”(you know it right away). This syntactic variation rapidly spread and was even made official in the *Nouveau Petit Robert 2002* (<http://www.ordp.vsnet.ch/fr/resonance/2003/juin/sourdout.htm>). Sourdout explained that the success of the switch of these parts of speech is linked to its paradigmatic and syntagmatic economy, as well as its invariability; the same word can be used as an adjective or an adverb by maintaining its syntactic position. Another syntactic specificity observed in *L'Esquive* is the use of the interjection *faire* + quotation. In different scenes of Kechiche's movie such a syntactic phenomenon can be heard. For instance, when Frida confronts Lydia after having found out that Krimo asked her out, she relates the fact to her friend by saying: “*i(l) m(e) fait, ouais ta copine Lydia elle est pas clair avec Krimo, lui i(l) devient ouf à cause d'elle.*” In this particular example, the verb *faire* can be translated as the quotative contemporary use of the word ‘like’ in English.

After these linguistic considerations on the structure of *le français de la banlieue*, it is important to note that it is impossible to exhaustively cover all the systematic complexities of this French variation, since this language is in constant evolution. As Duchêne reminds us, the main function of its existence remains being a cryptic way of communicating among a specific speech community. Therefore, when words become ‘transparent’, understood by the rest of the society, *banlieusards* change their way of communicating, in order to preserve a sub linguistic norm of their own.



## STANDARD FRENCH IN L'ESQUIVE

Despite the abundance of vernacular lexical items in *L'Esquive*, there is no doubt that Krimo and his friends are familiar with Standard French. Similarly to other *banlieue* films, paternal authority is mostly absent in Kechiche's movie. However, Krimo's mother appears several times during the movie in each of these short scenes transcribed below.

Mother: *Abdelkrim?*

Abdelkrim: *Ouais*

Mother: *Qu'est-ce (que) tu fais là? Faut que tu te prépares, on va y aller.*

Abdelkrim: *On va aller où ?*

Mother: *On va voir ton père.*

Abdelkrim: *Je crois pas que je vais venir aujourd'hui.*

Mother: *Pourquoi? Qu'est-ce qu'il y a?*

Abdelkrim: *bein rien, je veux juste sortir, j'irai la semaine prochaine.*

Mother: *Tu vas faire quoi?*

Abdelkrim: *'chais' pas, je vais rester avec les copains.*

Mother: *tes copains? Copines . . .*

Abdelkrim: *non copains.*

Mother: *ouais*

Abdelkrim: *comme ça, ça vous laissera un peu d'intimité aujourd'hui.*

Mother: *oh tu parles, intimité au parler . . . bein écoute, je t'ai fait à manger, donc tu te réchaufferas quand tu rentres.*

Abdelkrim: *t'as fait quoi?*

A few elisions, typically associated with oral French, can be identified; the omission of *que* in the question “qu'est-ce tu fais là” or when Krimo says “chais pas” instead of the formal phrase *je ne sais pas* (I don't know). These types of abbreviations are commonly uttered in informal spoken French (Van Compernelle & Williams).

In addition, in the few scenes in the classroom, the interactions among students and with the French teacher are further illustrations that these suburban teenagers can understand and use Standard French correctly. Finally, when Krimo and his friends encounter aggressive policemen, they also attempt to explain themselves in Standard French to avoid any miscommunication with these authoritative figures and ‘outsiders’.

Therefore, even though there are only a few specific instances where Standard French is used by the suburban teenagers, it illustrates that their bi-dialectalism (knowledge of vernacular and formal varieties of French) is simply a choice to use one or the other with certain interlocutors. Not surprisingly, they favor 'their' language when interacting with 'their' friends but are able to switch to a more formal variety when they converse with people who do not belong to their speech community.

### **Conclusion**

One of the main reasons for *le langage de la banlieue* to exist is to allow the members of this community to dissociate themselves from the rest of the society and to define their multi-ethnic background and identities. Despite the condemnations of French prescriptivism, this suburban vernacular has fascinated many linguists and will continue to be the focus of cultural studies in the future, as this vernacular is spreading and becoming more prominent in quotidian speech. Some *banlieue* words are now used across socially and geographically diverse groups. This phenomenon is associated with the popularity of hip hop music and *banlieue* films, which are extremely appreciated among French youth, and in which verlanized and borrowed words, metaphors and new expressions are present, as illustrated above with Kechiche's movie. These art forms (music and film industry) provide a voice for the multi-ethnic population of France, where the heterogeneous melting pot conceptualization of society is not usually promoted (Orlando 396). Orlando further argued that: "this new vernacular is extremely problematic within the French republican system, known for its rigidity and reticence in recognizing difference" (402). In addition, screenwriters and rap artists have the power of using their productions to open the eyes of many French speakers who do not necessarily live in the suburbs, and present the playfulness and richness of *le langage de la banlieue*. The script of *L'Esquive* is a worthy illustration of how suburban youths speak and project themselves in the French society. Krimeo and his friends use a variation of Standard French that contains all the typical linguistics

characteristics of this vernacular. Many prescriptivists believe that knowing such a French variety prevents the *banlieue* youth from developing adequate knowledge of Standard French and also argue that this linguistic separation reinforces the existing social fracture between the French middle class and the lower immigrants' class. On the other hand, low-income suburban residents believe that the language they use, and which partially defines their identity is empowering them, even though it also marginalizes them even more from mainstream French society (Messili & Aziza). For these bi-dialectal speakers, the key issue is to be able to determine in which circumstances and with which interlocutors one variation is most appropriate, rather than focusing on declaring ones' affiliation with a particular speech community unvaryingly. Ultimately, it's a question of choice, weighing whether the sense of belonging to a local multiethnic community with multicultural values is essential to the *banlieusards*, or whether they want to be recognized as members of the dominant French culture and its language. The decision to use a standard dialect over a less formal variety has more social consequences than linguistic ones, as both varieties present systematic and interesting features for linguists.

## Notes

1. <http://www.dictionnairedelezone.fr/>.
2. According to Lave and Wenger, a community of practice refers to a group of people who share an interest, a craft, and/or a profession. The group can evolve naturally because of the members' common interest in a particular domain or area, or it can be created specifically with the goal of gaining knowledge related to their field. It is through the process of sharing information and experiences with the group that the members learn from each other, and have an opportunity to develop themselves personally and professionally ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community\\_of\\_practice](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Community_of_practice))
3. Toledano reported that Mitterrand was asked the question during an interview on the national television: "Vous savez ce que c'est le 'chébran'?" (do you know what 'chébran' means). He responded: "Vous savez, quand j'étais enfant, on renversait l'ordre des syllabes dans les mots ; ce n'est pas nouveau ça ! ça veut dire branché, bien entendu."

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