



Marc Hatzfeld

France: return to Babel

Each nation establishes its borders, sometimes defines itself, certainly organises itself, and always affirms itself around its language, says Marc Hatzfeld. The language is then guarded by men of letters, by strict rules, not allowing for variety of expression. Against this backdrop, immigrants from ever more distant shores have arrived in France, bringing with them a different style of expression and another, more fluid, concept of language.



Today more than ever, the language issue, which might at one time have segued gracefully between pleasure in sense and sensual pleasure, is being seized on and exploited for political ends. Much of this we can put down to the concept of the nation–state, that symbolic and once radical item that was assigned the task of consolidating the fragmented political power of the time. During the long centuries from the end of the Middle Ages to the close of the *Ancien Régime*, this triumphant political logic sought to bind together nation, language and religion. East of the Rhine, for instance, this was particularly true of the links between nation and religion; West of the Rhine, it focused more on language. From Villers–Cotterêts¹ on, language — operating almost coercively — served as an instrument of political unification. The periodic alternation between an imperial style that was both permissive and varied when it came to customary practise, and the homogeneous and monolithic style adopted on the national front, led to constant comings and goings in the relationship between language and political power.

In France, the revocation of the Edict of Nantes by Louis XIV in 1685 resolved the relationship between nation and religion and gave language a more prominent role in defining nationality. Not long after, the language itself — by now regarded as public property — became a ward of state entitled to public protection. Taking things one step further, the eighteenth century philosophers of the Enlightenment conceived the idea of a coherent body of subject people and skilfully exploited this to clip the wings of a fabled absolute monarch in the name of another, equally mythical, form of sovereignty. All that remained was to organise the country institutionally. Henceforth, the idea that the allied forces of people, nation and language together made up the same collective history was pursued with zeal.

What we see as a result is this curious emergence of language itself as a concept. Making use of a fiction that reached down from a great height to penetrate a cultural reality that was infinitely more subtle and flexible, each nation establishes its borders, sometimes defines itself, certainly organises itself, and always affirms itself around its language. While we in Europe enjoy

as many ways of speaking as there are localities and occupations, there are administrative and symbolic demands to fabricate the fantasy of a language that clerics and men of letters would appropriate to themselves. It is these who, in the wake of the politicians, help to eliminate the variety of ways people have of expressing themselves and of understanding one another. Some scholars, falling into what they fail to see is a highly politicised trap, complete this process by coming up with a scientific construct heavily dependent on the influence of mathematical theories such as those of de Saussure and, above all, of Jakobson. Paradoxically, this body of work relies on a highly malleable, mobile, elastic reality to develop the tight, highly structured concept that is "language" (Jacques Lacan). And from that point, language itself becomes a prisoner of Lacan's own system — linguistics.

This is the intellectual backdrop against which people from ever more distant lands begin to arrive in a country like France from the 1920s and, in rapidly increasing numbers, the 1960s onwards. They bring with them customs, perspectives, mentalities and languages, all plainly at odds with the monolithic conception of language. The clash is violent enough to provoke vigorous demands for this language alone to be spoken. It is now acknowledged as the only language, the one people *must* use or face the consequences. Any misuse of the official means of communication becomes a moral failing, a breach of the law that binds people, nation, language and destiny together with alarming rigidity. To a considerable degree, this is where we still are at the beginning of the twenty-first century. The housing estates of the *banlieue* are home to a shimmering diversity of cultural and linguistic imports and, in a political context where the nation-state is losing ground to new forms of political organisation that owe to the logic of empire, the issue of language surreptitiously re-emerges. It is not so much a confrontation between the official French language and other languages as a fundamental questioning of the very idea of language, even the emergence of other linguistic practices, albeit in embryonic form.

The first manifestation of this revival of linguistic diversity is associated with the constant flow from outside, from places where language has maintained its rippling fluidity. In sub-Saharan Africa, for example, it is customary for each cultural grouping or "clan" — something we call "ethnic groups" for want of a better term — to speak its own language; even this word "language" is often no more than a device we use to make these distinctions. And, contrary to what we might imagine in our part of the world, people mingle freely since marriages regularly and casually cross the boundaries of clan membership. While a *lingua franca* is essential when moving around, it is often the case in Africa that mother and father speak different languages and that an adoptive mother or a foster brother speaks yet another. So it is not unusual for five-year-olds to use five or six dialects in a day, depending on whom they are speaking to. This was very much the pattern in pre-war Alexandria: people spoke Greek to the grocer, Armenian to the tailor, English to the civil servant; Jews spoke French among themselves, Italian was used with the armourer and people naturally spoke Arabic with the locals.

This understanding of the multiple functions of language has taken on a new lease of life throughout the housing estates of the *banlieue* for some time now. There are still the occasional uptight schoolteachers and ingratiating social workers who earnestly encourage parents to "speak French at home" with their children, using cheap psychobabble in support of their arguments. But more and more parents from Black Africa and North Africa have the self-confidence to treat this linguistic narrow-mindedness dressed up as a

moral good with derision and, while they're at it, have a good laugh at the Europeans who are so uncomfortable speaking anything other than the official language of their parents. Just as they wear the traditional *boubou* with great panache and continue to carry their children on their backs like mothers in the old country, African mothers talk to their children in Bambara and Soninké. There is also a reversal of trends in the discourse of official and professional environments. Health professionals, educators and social workers are happy to encourage the spread of "exotic" languages. The way in which this penetration of linguistic variation is being legitimised also affects people from the Caribbean, the Maghreb, Poland and, of course, the many different Chinese immigrants for whom there is no question of speaking French at home. The revival of Kabyle in Algeria is finding unexpected support on certain estates. While school is still the site of an almost total linguistic exclusivism, the same cannot be said of the street, or of the shopping precincts or bistros. The family itself is often home to true diversity: while relationships between the generations are maintained in vernacular languages, brothers and sisters are more and more inclined, at home at least, to communicate with each other in their mother tongue. The appeal of their native languages is enhanced by travel, current debate and a rekindling of pride.

This loophole is exploited not by a new suburban language of the *banlieue* but by an abrasive relationship to language that carries a radical potential. Take vocabulary: in the staffroom of a suburban secondary school, teachers, assured of their superior knowledge, are driven to despair by the kids' language, boys and girls alike. They make fun of the coarse, impoverished vocabulary of "the kids from the estates", sometimes with compassion, at other times more brutally, and relate spicy anecdotes about students' mistranslations and misinterpretations, not to mention the endless spelling "mistakes" so hilarious you'd split your sides laughing. All this is true: the poverty, vulgarity and worse. The vocabulary of the children from the estates, like that of their elders and distant forebears, is embellished with a steady flow of juicy terms tirelessly exhorting so—and-so to "fuck off", "get stuffed", "go fuck your mother", "suck my dick" and other equally specific sexual or scatological recommendations. However, we should remember that behind the facade of what adults in their concern for propriety quite rightly refer to as "vulgarity", it is actually the people themselves who are the objects of scorn. The lower classes have always been comfortable with sexual innuendo; it's a way of giving vent to their desires or of satisfying them, of hungrily playing around with them and even using these words to take advantage of them. From their vantage point, critics of vulgarity refuse to acknowledge that this type of speech is the expression of a popular philosophy, which articulates a view of humanity that interprets the world in its own way. According to this world-view, humanity has not completely shaken off its animal nature: teasing one another with a kind of vicious tenderness about love, desire, social and sexual encounters and future pleasures is an enjoyable pastime. The teachers' jokes about vulgarity could also be the prudish reactions of a social class that prefers to deal with the problematic issue of sex by relying on makeshift solutions drawn from psychoanalysis or the prison environment, rather than making use of the subtle effects of uninhibited, unconstrained speech. The jury remains out on this debate; in the meantime, a little less contempt would be no bad thing.

As for the spelling mistakes: they show that if "orthography is a mandarin", as the slogans with which the generation of May '68 challenged the arbitrary authority of French orthographic conventions suggested, it is because language is above all something spoken and, by definition, uncontrolled, untamed.

Wherever they come from, many of the inhabitants of the housing estates belong to these oral cultures; they relate to them through language, and set greater store by spoken words that take flight than by written words that remain static. They simply love talking. And amid this purely oral exercise, where language is liberated from the burden of written convention and academic restrictions, there are games of verbal artistry, the likes of which have not been seen since the *Jeux Floraux*, the great poetry competitions of the *L'Occitane-South*.

There are three types of verbal artistry specifically related to spoken language that people in the *banlieues* deploy with gusto. The first is the dig (*la vanne*). The dig is a short, sharp verbal jab directed at a target by a casual speaker in a display of quick-fire humour. People used to say "*mettre en boîte*", meaning "to take the mickey"; in the south of France, they're more likely to say "*chambrier*", "to tease"; on the estates, it's "*vanner*": "to slag off". You trap your opponent/friend in a verbal net, then loose a well-aimed dart at the unfortunate target. The dig hurts, but above all it makes people laugh. When it comes unexpectedly or at the end of a pause, it takes a person completely by surprise, leaving them without a comeback. The dig represents the sudden appearance of the absurd in a hyper-civilised and highly-regulated yet sordid world. It's a sidelong glance at reality. Within certain groups, the boys slag each other off non-stop; it's a game that leaves few marks if played skilfully and is frequently enjoyed by sharp-tongued women and girls too, as well as by workers during their breaks and pupils in the school playground.

Verbal sparring (*la joute*) is really just a longer-lasting dig; more precisely, it's a dig that provokes a riposte or one that is extended. Once the exchange involves several players, a duel of words ensues and the spectators await the outcome of lightning exchanges, of biting verbal jousting that sparkles with metaphor, semantic inversion, unsuspected imagery and situational comedy. It's partly and quite frequently a matter of getting one up on the other person, but sparring is more than just an exercise in single combat. It's initially successful when the listeners, who are there to be impressed after all, are made to laugh. But sparring goes beyond laughter: the point is to earn the audience's informed approval of the phenomenal oral and intellectual prowess of the combatants. Above all, sparring depends for its success on a shared view of the world's essential absurdity, a view that is fierce and at the same time sharp-witted. In fact, it's the world around them that is the butt of the players' savage humour; their target is often other people, those impossibly distant "others" who have not the slightest clue about who we are, no more than they have about life, youth, what we're actually doing here at all; the others, those pathetic fools whose instinct to humiliate is repaid in equal measure by the mockery specially reserved for them.

The third linguistic device manipulated with great agility in the *banlieue* is slam. Originating in the black ghettos of the United States and readily adopted in similar social environments elsewhere, slam is the verbal equivalent of a door slamming. It's nothing more than a domesticated and somewhat elitist version of the first two devices. Just as towards the end of the Middle Ages the troubadours happily displayed their powers of improvisation, slammers, too, are expected to leave the safety of the perimeter and balance on a rope of words, like verbal tight-rope walkers without the benefit of a safety net. Slam in its original form is based on improvisation and competition among slammers. It is a dramatisation of the type of metaphorical vivacity we have already seen demonstrated in the dig and verbal sparring. Located somewhere between theatre and poetry, slam is an opportunity for those masters of verbal

bling recently arrived from the heart of the African savannah or the shores of the Mediterranean or the forests of Colombia to take the stage.

Its greatest virtue for the purposes of our present discussion is primarily that it overthrows that symbol of linguistic dictatorship represented by the written word, the imperial written word. Slam, like the dig and verbal sparring, legitimises verbal artistry in an environment that keeps exponents of the written word at a distance: slam is the acrobatics of the spoken word raised to the level of a fine art. In this sense, it may well be reconnecting with certain cultural phenomena that predate the written word, a furious, destructive archaism that relocates the present moment — the now — at the centre of the world by rejecting the arguments and expertise of organised memory and capital. In this way it restores pleasure in the instantaneous and the volatile to both authors and listeners, qualities that are tending to disappear from creative possibilities. It encounters en route the John Cassavetes, the Antonin Artauds, the Rimbauds, all those who lived for the moment. Its other not inconsiderable quality is that it confers a public status on artists and acknowledges them by publicising them and their work, something that never fails to surprise them.

Slammers are surprised because it doesn't even occur to them that they might have any particular status as artists, no more than it does to rappers or to street artists: they slam the way they talk, knowing full well that the insolence lies more in their language than in themselves. They are merely the temporary conduit. This language has neither name nor fixed syntax, but those who are given to labels call it *verlan*. The transgressive nature of the language of the *banlieues* reaches its logical conclusion in this French variation of backslang: it ceases to function as a language at all and disappears.

The nimble verbal manoeuvres that speakers of *verlan*² engage in are well known. They reverse the syllables of words to disguise the meaning of what they are saying from outsiders. In every other respect — meaning, communication — the conversation is perfectly normal. In its eagerness to deceive, *verlan* often suppresses vowels that would appear in black and white — *a* and *i* disappear, *o* becomes *e* or rather *eu*. So the word *arabe* becomes *rebeu*, *femme* becomes *meuf* and *juif* becomes *feuj*. But the word *cit * retains its colour and is pronounced as *t ci*, while the *chinois* are *noiches*. These are a sample of classic *verlan* terms from the current decade that have had a longer shelf life.³

Backslang is dynamic and refuses to stay put: it changes its style as often as a chameleon its colour and there is no guarantee that we shall have the same *verlan* in five or ten years' time. It evades all attempts to systematise it or allow interpreters to decode it or penetrate its secrets. It picks up words from the US, it absorbs the latest cool turn of phrase; it borrows rules from the neighbouring estate and ventures further afield to adopt a secret syntax invented by a bunch of pals. It is the private language of a gang of schoolkids or a group of residents in one or other of the tower blocks; of a team of nocturnal street artists or the regulars at a boxing club. In Marseilles, *verlan* has blended with the local accent and the taste for tall stories; in the *d partement* of Seine–Saint–Denis, it is interspersed with old expressions from Parisian slang; oddly, in eastern France it has absorbed many expressions from Arabic. It stands regular French on its head and delights in the exercise.

While French prides itself on its clarity and rigour, *verlan* seeks opacity and a certain vagueness of interpretation; you could even say that it cultivates ambiguity. While French claims, or believes itself to be a stable language,

whose jealously guarded formulae have granted it an almost permanent status, *verlan* is fluid, as changeable as an autumn sky. While French tries to establish itself in international affairs in the face of formidable competition, *verlan* fades as soon as anyone comes close and completely disappears if they try to touch it. While French delights in its sweetness and subtlety, the staccato rhythm of *verlan* assaults the ear. While French derives its respectability from a highly codified written language preserved by dictionaries, guides to Correct Usage and the swords of nonagenarian members of the French Academy, *verlan* dissolves in an ephemeral spoken language, carried along by the tides of fashion and the mood of the moment. *Verlan* is not opposed to French, it respectfully pledges its allegiance to it; it penetrates the French language the better to highlight it. It sets French aside, sets itself against it, always ready to drop it at the earliest opportunity so it can pursue its crazy metaphors and revel in the earthy exchanges of the fish market.

In years to come, there will doubtless be some good writers who will be advised by their communication specialists (with supporting footnotes) to write fiction in *verlan* — detective novels ideally, in the crime fiction bracket if possible. But be warned: this *verlan* will be paralysed by the poison of a rock-solid written code. It will be robbed of its opacity and its ephemeral charm or be transformed into yet another type of secret code. It will walk with leaden feet once it is captured in writing. Just as Villon's poetry is but a distant reflection of the troubadours' verbal virtuosity, this *verlan* will be nothing more than a pale imitation of the abrasive impact of verbal sparring and rap.

But this is not to say that we should be protecting an elusive *verlan* from denigration by the French language of the Academy, which is itself a fiction. *Verlan* is one of the many ways of speaking French which is just as valid — no more than that — as the legalese of French administrators and the literary French of secondary teachers, as the slang-studded French of Céline or Jésus la Caille, the archaic French of diplomats or the vibrantly coloured French from Africa and the French West Indies. As well as their native languages, most of the residents of the suburban estates speak all these variants of the local language, a French that is increasingly unpredictable, volatile, multi-faceted. Like most people living in France, they know how to adapt their language, which is generally looked down on, to suit the particular speakers and situations they engage with.

It is not the unrealistic accuracy prized by the lovers of pure science that generates this linguistic richness but the very opposite: misunderstanding. In the context of a linguistic diversity that has been restored as if to reverse the old myth of Babel, it is not about sanctioning those who may have broken some taboo decreed for some unknown reason by a deity who has since lost his mind or his nerve — certainly never his problem in the past. On the contrary: the same deity, proud of the audacity of his creation, pays tribute to humanity by endowing it with the gift of linguistic diversity, a happy device for its encounters with others and the cause of misunderstanding. For this ancient deity knows full well that it is misunderstanding that prompts people to draw closer to one another, that arouses their curiosity and fuels their desires to the point of madness, and sparks their creative frustration. Misunderstanding is what makes mankind an inventive and fragile, yet comical and ridiculous species. While contemporary political powers are coming unstuck as they pursue their grandiose visions of human unity, tongues, too, are, quite literally, being loosed and set free by their now powerless censors. In the nooks and crannies of the run-down, neglected sink estates, they are rediscovering their unfettered inventiveness. Here, distanced from the posturings of certain

imperial languages chasing recognition within international organisations and in school textbooks, other forms of linguistic expression are surrendering to the delights of interpretative doubt, yielding to the sirens of misunderstanding. In these estates, the multiplicity fostered by a real enjoyment of diversity can be seen at work; it is here that misunderstanding provides a framework for people to approach one another and strangeness becomes the basis for them to get to know one another.

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- ¹ In 1539, the ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts, which prescribed French as the official language, was signed by Francois I — trans.
 - ² A term derived from *vers-l'en*, where the syllables of the word *l'envers* — reverse/opposite — are themselves reversed — trans.
 - ³ In traditional English backslang, a form that has been in use for generations if not centuries and was originally a form of criminal communication, the first syllable of any word is transferred — reversed — to the opposite end of that word and suffixed with the sound "ey/ay". Thus: Arab would become rabaye; woman is omanwey, Jew becomes Ewjeý, Chinese Inesche and so on — ed.

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