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HEADLINE: Backward Runs French. Reels the Mind.

BYLINE: By ALEXANDER STILLE

Those who have studied French but haven't been in France for a while may find themselves confused when they overhear conversations that sound familiar but remain largely incomprehensible. Gradually they may realize, or some kind soul may explain, that what they are hearing is a popular slang called Verlan in which standard French spellings or syllables are reversed or recombined, or both.

Thus the standard greeting "Bonjour, ca va?" or "Good day, how are you?" becomes "Jourbon, ca av?" "Une fete" (a party) has become "une teuf"; the word for woman or wife, femme, has become meuf; a cafe has become feca; and so on. The word Verlan itself is a Verlanization of the term l'envers, meaning "the reverse."

Within a couple of decades, Verlan has spread from the peripheral housing projects of France's poorest immigrants, heavily populated with Africans and North African Arabs, and gained widespread popularity among young people across France. It has seeped into film dialogue, advertising campaigns, French rap and hip-hop music, the mainstream media. It has even made it into some of the country's leading dictionaries.

A language of alienation that has, paradoxically, also become a means of integration, Verlan expresses France's love-hate relationship with its immigrant community and has begun to attract a number of scholarly studies.

"Speaking backwards becomes a metaphor of opposition, of talking back," writes Natalie Lefkowitz, a professor of French applied linguistics at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Wash., and the author of "Talking Backwards, Looking Forwards: The French Language Game Verlan" (Gunter Narr, 1991), which, when it was published, was one of the first major studies of Verlan.

But along with its subversive element, Ms. Lefkowitz explained in an interview, "for the young urban professional, Verlan is a form of political correctness expressing solidarity with and awareness of the immigrant community at a time of anti-immigrant politics."

The first documented uses of Verlan date to the 19th century, when it was used as a code language among criminals, said the French scholar Louis-Jean Calvet. But the current and most widespread use of Verlan has its origins in the growth of France's banlieus, the peripheral areas outside major cities, where the government built high-rise housing for its immigrant worker population after World War II. In the 1960's and 70's, many North African workers were joined there by their wives and families.

"This housing that was supposed to be temporary, and was built intentionally apart from the mainstream society, became permanent," said Meredith Doran, an assistant professor of French applied linguistics at Penn State University, who recently finished a dissertation on the culture and language of the French banlieus. Their inhabitants also call a banlieu la Cite, which has been Verlanized into "la Teci."

Verlan caught on among the second generation of immigrants who were living between cultures. "They were born in France and often did not speak Arabic," Ms. Lefkowitz said, "but they did not feel integrated into France."

Ms. Doran explained, "Verlan was a way of their establishing their language and their own distinct identity." The term *beur*, which is a Verlanization of the French word *Arabe*, refers specifically to the second- and third-generation North Africans. Until recently, there was even a radio station of French North Africans called Radio Beur.

"Verlan has many functions," writes Vivienne Mela, an anthropologist who teaches at the University of Paris VIII, in a recent article called "Verlan 2000." "Initially, it was a secret language that allowed people to speak about illicit activities without being understood. And while Verlan conserves this function, its principal function is for young people to express both their difference and their attachment to a French identity. They have invented a culture that is in between the culture of their parents, which they no longer possess, and the French culture to which they don't have complete access."

Verlan, however, is also widely spoken by the other immigrant groups of the *banlieus*, mainly sub-Saharan Africans and Caribbean blacks. And Verlan, along with reversing syllables and words, has also incorporated terms from Creole, Arabic, Rom (the language of the Gypsies) and American slang to create a kind of speech of the disenfranchised.

"Verlan serves as an interface between these different groups who do not have a common language," said Alain Rey, one of the editors of the *Petit Robert* dictionary, the first of the standard dictionaries to incorporate a number of Verlan terms.

More than just reversing words, scholars say, Verlan reverses what have traditionally been regarded as negative qualities in France -- ethnic and religious differences, non-French identity, nonstandard speech -- and turns them into positive attributes that are consciously cultivated.

"In a country obsessed with linguistic purity, it turns a stigma into a positive emblem, a form of covert prestige," Ms. Lefkowitz said. Verlanizing words, she and others say, changes their tone and meaning. "When you say *teci* for *cite*, it is a way of expressing affection, like saying homeland," she added.

Verlan, in the views of Mr. Rey and others, is also a playful way for the French to forge a language for dealing with ethnic, racial and religious differences. The Verlanized words for Arab, black or Jew "allow you to mark racial and culture differences without insulting people," Ms. Lefkowitz said.

But Leyla Habane, a Moroccan-French university student who provided research assistance when Ms. Doran was working on her dissertation, is leary of that interpretation. "I think these terms can be pejorative in any form," she said, although she admitted that they could also be used playfully. Perhaps because it has been so widely adopted by most French, she finds the term *beur* offensive.

But there is no question that Verlan is used to discuss race, ethnicity and other taboo subjects. In one recent study, the French scholars Jean-Luc Azra and Veronique Cheneau, both of the University of Paris VIII,

documented about 350 Verlan terms, which tended to be clustered around a handful of subjects: illegal activities like theft and drugs; race, ethnicity and national origin; and taboo topics like sex, as well as everyday objects on the street and in the subway.

Verlan was discovered by mainstream French in the 1980's after a series of major riots and confrontations with police brought the problems of la Cite to the attention of most French. "These riots put a spotlight on the youth subculture of the banlieus, and that's when everybody noticed that these youths had this language of their own," Ms. Doran said.

A series of books and films about life in the banlieus followed, bringing Verlan to the attention of a wider public. The 1995 movie "La Haine" ("Hate"), about the lives of three housing-project friends, with much of its dialogue in Verlan, was a revelation to many French, though some found parts of it incomprehensible. Also very popular was a film thriller called "Les Ripoux," which is a Verlanization of the French word pourri, meaning rotten. Ripoux has become a common term for corrupt police officers.

Verlan became so popular that even former French President Francois Mitterrand showed off his knowledge of it during a television interview several years ago. When he was asked whether he knew the word chebran (Verlan for branche, which means hip), he answered, of course, but added, "That's already passe; you should say cable," which literally means "wired for cable," but means "plugged in" or with-it in current slang.

Ms. Lefkowitz explained: "There are now different kinds of Verlan. There is the Verlan of the original group, the working class immigrants from the banlieus. Then there is the Verlan of the urban professionals, bourgeois Verlan or 'Verlan geoisbour.' There is also the Verlan of the teenagers who use it to distinguish themselves from the adult word as a game and a form of amusement."

The appropriation of Verlan by mainstream French culture is viewed with some uneasiness by those in the banlieus. "They find it annoying," Ms. Habane said. "They feel it is their language, and now they want to take this from us, too."

As a result, Verlan keeps renewing so that the speech of la Cite stays a step ahead of geoisbour Verlan. Many terms have also been "reverlanized." Beur, Ms. Habane said, now that it has been widely adopted by the French, is sometimes seen as pejorative, with many North African speakers using the term reub, which is beur itself turned inside out.

As a Frenchwoman of Moroccan descent pursuing a university degree, Ms. Habane expressed mixed feelings about Verlan. "I worry that it creates a kind of linguistic gap between these young people and the rest of the world that can become a trap," she said. "When I speak to some kids in my neighborhood, they often don't understand me."

And while the emulation of Verlan and banlieu culture might be flattering, she worries about recent polls showing that a majority of French feel that there are too many Arabs in the country.

Whatever the case, Verlan has made its mark on the language, said Mr. Rey, the lexicographer. "Many of them have become so common, they are not even thought of as Verlan," he said, and their proliferation in

newspapers and novels has forced Le Petit Robert to include many Verlan terms in its most recent editions, to the annoyance of purists at the Academie Francaise, whose dictionary has resisted.

"We feel that a dictionary should reflect the language that is actually spoken," Mr. Rey said. "Besides, I think, on balance, there is much creativity in Verlan, and it shows that the French language is very much alive."

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CORRECTION-DATE: August 22, 2002, Thursday

CORRECTION:

An article in Arts & Ideas on Saturday about the French slang known as Verlan misspelled the term for the areas in which it developed among immigrants, and characterized those areas incorrectly. The term is banlieue, not banlieu. It refers to any suburb, not just to a suburb in which the government built high-rise housing after World War II.

The article also misstated the meaning of "la Cite," as used by suburban residents. It refers to local housing projects, not to the whole suburbs enclosing them.

GRAPHIC: Photo (Andrzej Dudzinski)

LOAD-DATE: August 17, 2002