THE USAGE WARS À L'ENVERS

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I recently downloaded a podcast of a French radio program, "Époque," and was listening to it one night a few weeks ago. The program was targeted at youth, executed and produced by youth, and centered around issues of political and social enfranchisement of young people in France—that is, from what I could understand. I am fluent in French; I attended an all-French immersion school for fifteen years, and read, speak and understand the language with relative ease. However, what I quickly realized was that the language on the program was not the French of my early education, nor was it the French of ten years ago when I lived with a French family in Paris for a month. More complex than simple slang or casual colloquialism, this sounded like an altogether different language, from which I could extricate meaning only through the brief contextual commentary offered by the older-sounding program host.

What I was hearing was in fact an extremely new form of spoken French. *Verlan*, as it is called, is literally the phrase *à l'envers* (translation: backward) backward—a system of reversing the first and second half of a word and thus creating a new one. For instance, in verlan, the word *femme* (woman) becomes *meuf*; the word *arabe* (person of North African descent) becomes *beurre*. In verlan, almost every proper noun has been thus manipulated, and a simple sentence begins to sound a bit like gibberish to the unversed ear. Though a comparison to American Pig Latin would suggest a kind of obscure and short-lived early adolescent phase that many Americans once experienced, verlan is the ubiquitous language of French youth. It originated in the banlieues, or the suburban slums that surround major urban centers like Paris, as a kind of gang language, but in the last ten years it has spread to almost every corner of youth culture.

Verlan is much more than a simple linguistic trend. It is both a social protest, as its origins in the slums would suggest, as well as a widespread resistance to the institutional conventions of the language itself. Verlan is a subversion of the otherwise rigid ordinances for French usage, as prescribed by the Académie Française, a government body conceived in 1635 during the reign of King Louis XIII, and the single authority for the official French language. It sets the standards for language education nationwide, and its members, aptly named "The Immortals," oversee all formal changes, additions, and alterations to the official language, embodied in the Académie's standard usage dictionary. The body's intent was "to set down the French language, to give it rules, to render it pure and comprehensible for all" ("L'histoire").[1] For decades, the Académie Française has attempted to maintain the "purity" of the language by resisting such trends as slang, or argot, as well as the Americanization of common parts of speech. Its excessive rigidity has drawn widespread scrutiny, but its lack of enforcement power has given it the status of archaic vestige at worst and

cultural relic at best. Yet regardless of its seeming impotence on a large scale, the Académie Française nevertheless represents an official government position on the institution of language, and as such, it has been at odds with the French people since its inception nearly four centuries ago.

In the United States, which lacks an institution similar to the Académie Française, the debate over language has been framed by lexicographers and theorists such as David Foster Wallace, Steven Pinker, and George Orwell. These tend to fall into two main categories: Prescriptivists, who, in the vein of the Académie, adhere to stringent grammatical guidelines, and Descriptivists, who believe that all forms of spoken language (by native speakers) are inherently correct, an argument that would seem to resonate with advocates of verlan. At first glance it would appear that the schism between the Académie and its young *résistants* is at heart a divide between traditionalist Prescriptivism and progressive Descriptivism. However, the nuances of the arguments by American lexicographers reveal a surprising paradox: Language exists as a tool for protest, but when the institution being resisted is the language itself, we must reexamine the terms of the debate.

David Foster Wallace is a self-proclaimed Prescriptivist, albeit with a pragmatic philosophy. In his essay "Tense Present," he contends that the conventions of a language are determined primarily by a desire to gain acceptance into a particular group, or "Discourse Community":

> People really do "judge" one another according to their use of language. . . . [T]his judging involves acceptance, meaning not some touchy-feely emotional affirmation but actual acceptance or rejection of somebody's bid to be regarded as a peer, a member of somebody else's collective or community or Group. (50)

This argument is integral to the early development of verlan. Its earliest forms were intended as a language of exclusion, of subversion against the police, and of protest against established French society. The notion of a discourse community could not be felt more strongly than in the case where outsiders find the language completely impenetrable.

However, Wallace goes further. He believes that a shared desire to be "taken seriously" is justification for the existence of a Standard Written English (SWE), or the standard language of the educated class. Though he supports the rights of various dialects to exist, he believes that this human impulse towards acceptance and respect by one's peers motivates the widespread acceptance of SWE.

Language theorist Steven Pinker challenges Wallace's ideas as being classist; he sees SWE as a tool of a hierarchical system to instill social differentiation. In his essay "Grammar Puss," he shows how linguistic trends in the eighteenth century supported the rise of the intellectual elite:

> Latin was considered the language of enlightenment and learning and it was offered as an ideal of precision and logic to which English should aspire. The period saw unprecedented social mobility, and anyone who wanted to distinguish himself as cultivated had to master the best version of English. . . . [T]he manuals tried to outdo one another by including greater numbers of increasingly fastidious rules that no refined person could afford to ignore. (2)

By this account, Pinker asserts that the Prescriptivist rules were instated in order to preserve a kind of upper-class elitism, resisting the trend of upward economic mobility of the lower classes that otherwise defined the time. These rules, when applied today, only reinforce this elitism, and thus emphasizing one dialect above all others cements the effects of social stratification.

What's more, Pinker shows how a collective aspiration toward "educated" speech debases the power of language as a political tool, especially by the common people. In his view, a person who uses language that does not meet the arbitrary standards of educated English will automatically be thought "ignorant of the rules, rather than challenging [them]" (3). By arguing, as Wallace does, that SWE exists as the only platform on which "serious" discourse can take place, language is denied the power to act as its own tool of protest. Alternative uses of language are rendered impotent.

In Pinker's view, Wallace's failing is that he believes everyone aspires to more or less the same Group: that of the educated class, those whose opinions are taken seriously. Pinker suggests that the standardization of language robs alternative forms of expression of their power to evoke resistance, protest, or criticism and merely reduces them to "ignorant" forms of communication. The young French-Algerian immigrant who decries police brutality in his own language, verlan, risks the credibility of his argument because of the arbitrary standards of the elitist Académie.

Indeed the early development of verlan would seem to confirm Pinker's views that "alternative" language can act as a political tool. Its conception was rooted in contempt for the French society that refused to take this group of people seriously. The dialect's first words related primarily to drugs, guns, and gang violence, realities of the suburban slums, as well as to politically and socially disenfranchised groups such as North African immigrants (*beurres* for *arabes*, *kaïra* for *racaille*, or rabble) or racial signifiers (*renoi* for *noire*, or black). It was used to withhold meaning from figures of authority, namely the police, and quickly grew to the status of gang-speak.

However, as verlan gained ground amongst youth culture at large, its focus shifted as well. Whereas it began as a language of self-identification for a marginalized demographic, it quickly morphed into a broad, generational war to reclaim the French language for its speakers. By the early 2000s, it was no longer the "exclusive" language of minorities or gangs, and as it spread through schoolyards and shopping malls, television and radio, it began to encompass a new attitude towards language as a whole. Language itself became the authority against which the protest was mobilized, itself

transformed into the political battleground. French youth had revolted against a single oppressive figure: the centuries-old Académie Française. They took everyday words—*mère*, *père*, *école*, *ami*, *voisin*—and literally reversed them, made everyday phrases convoluted, turned the traditional austerity of the French language into a joke. The once sleek and graceful phrases were made ugly and halting. And it made a statement. It was language turned back to its vulgar original—a language of commoners.

Wallace contends that the primary reason for standard language is to demonstrate respect for the listener. By using correct grammar, one saves the listener the extra effort of decipherment. Clearly, the point of verlan was the opposite: to demonstrate an open contempt for the institution of language and to debase it at its most fundamental level. Contrary to his argument that dialects can exist simultaneously and independently, verlan in fact rejects the legitimacy of all standardized language. Both Pinker and Wallace examine the contexts in which language is put to use over a political agenda, but what they have failed to acknowledge are the circumstances in which language is not at the service of a specific protest, but is itself being protested. Neither Prescriptive rigidity nor Descriptive inclusiveness could account for the violent reaction that sprang out of the suburbs and into the mouths of French teenagers nationwide. All language—the idea of language itself—was under fire.

It is ironic, based upon the progressive, near revolutionary precepts of verlan, that its strongest defense comes from a hardline Prescriptivist. In his essay "Politics and the English Language," George Orwell argues against the misleading rhetoric and intentional vagueness of what he calls "ready-made" language, which is perpetuated by standardized language (and, presumably, institutions such as the Académie). The preconceived phrases of learned speakers, he says, flood our thoughts and corrode meaning. They create vagueness and imprecision and are used by the governing elite to mislead the uneducated, or those who are simply not interested in weeding through dense rhetoric. He argues for an active stance in the determination of one's language, for choosing words that best express—rather than conceal or prevent—thought. "One can choose—not simply accept—the phrases that will best cover the meaning" (9). Verlan, at heart, is just this: a rejection of institutional and dispassionate language, a direct confrontation with the insincerity of politically correct and traditionalist ways of speaking. Orwell argues in favor of Prescriptivism only to the extent that it makes meaning clear; beyond that, he insists that the speaker must take an active and autonomous role in the formation of phrases.

Orwell's theories reveal a breakdown in the traditional division between Prescriptive and Descriptive language theory. Orwell argues that the most important element of grammatical Prescriptivism is clarity and sincerity; if anything, his is a kind of Prescriptivism for thought more than language. He advocates active language formation that excludes the "ready-made" phrase, which serves only to streamline and homogenize the kinds of ideas we discuss. Speakers (and writers) must exhibit freedom and autonomy in their language choices—and this, surprisingly, is a distinctly

Descriptivist concept. By emphasizing the importance of individuals choosing their own language, Orwell reverses the sense of the terms Prescriptivism and Descriptivism. The fundamental tenets of Prescriptivism become an unwitting ally of the Descriptivist objective.

Individual choice is at the core of verlan's power as a political tool. Linguistic agency reflects its speakers' much-desired political agency. Verlan is used not merely to differentiate its speakers from the educated French elite, to establish its own Discourse Community, but rather to engage politically with the evolution of the language, as Orwell most adamantly suggests we should. Using verlan is not a social statement, and economic or racial statement, but a linguistic statement: an affirmation of autonomy and agency in language itself.

And so the Académie Française appears to be in a state of turmoil, if not on its way out altogether. The rigid prescriptions of standard French have existed since the seventeenth century, and today they have been almost entirely rejected by the new generation of French speakers. Yet I find it unlikely that the classical French language will disappear altogether. Verlan will, in my mind, soon join the status of dialect, shared by a generation of disillusioned youth. However, it is a potent reminder of the power of language that is developed in the most democratic of ways: by the people.

NOTE

1. "La mission qui lui fut assignée dès l'origine était de fixer la langue française, de lui donner des règles, de la rendre pure et compréhensible par tous."

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