

**Productivity of apparent morphological irregularities:
The case of *Verlan***

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I. Introduction

I.I Motivation for the Project

The idea for this project came as a convergence of several factors. I had gradually become interested in Linguistics starting my first semester at SMU. The seeds were planted during my Rhetoric class freshman year in which I discovered the concept of semiotics and the idea that language can inform and construct a reality. I distinctly remember an example that my professor, Nina Schwartz, gave in class. She pointed to the French word *ennui*, meaning boredom, but not a simple “English” boredom. The word contains nuances of meanings related to boredom resulting from world-weariness. It refers to a kind of depressed and frustrated existential boredom. She also posed us the question: is it possible to feel *ennui* without having access to that word in one’s vocabulary? I was fascinated by the idea that knowledge of different languages gives us access to a different range of experiences, constructs for us a different reality. My interest, once piqued in rhetoric, was further developed in a Spanish class I took for my Foreign Languages major: Introduction to Spanish Linguistics. In that class, I was really interested in the way that the discipline could combine the mathematical regularity of Noam Chomsky’s theory of Universal Grammar with a social analysis from semiotics and semantics.

As a result of these classes, and my affinity for and interest in the subject, I had been considering pursuing a Linguistics PhD after graduation. I had also been fortunate enough to experience linguistic diversity, having, at the time, just returned from two study abroad trips: a summer in southern France and a semester in Madrid. My roommate had just returned from a semester of study in Paris, and we were reminiscing about being submersed in a new language and culture. She mentioned being surprised by the pervasiveness of slang in Paris which sparked a quick Google search and an inspired discussion of syllable inversion in a French slang called *Verlan*. The pig-latin-esque process which converted a *femme* to a *meuf*, with its social characteristics (being a language developed by the children of Maghreb immigrants), and its formal linguistic applications (which words are inverted and why) provided a clear way to unite my interests.

I.II Relation to Discipline

After deciding that I wanted to study *Verlan*, I still lacked an area of specialization. I considered pursuing a primary social locus, but this failed to account for my interest in *Verlan*’s formal aspects. The literature available outside of the paradigm of socio-linguistics was generally sparse, and consisted mainly in studies of *Verlan* phonology and semantics and not morpho-syntaxis. Was this, I wondered, due to the fact that there did not exist morphosyntactic phenomena in *Verlan* to study? Did *Verlan* merit further morphosyntactic study, and if so, what specific aspects of *Verlan* syntax and morphology would be most interesting?

My answer came while I was reading a book recommended on MIT's linguistics graduate school page. The book, *The Atoms of Language*, by Mark Baker, was an exposition of Noam Chomsky's theory of Universal Grammar in terms of a parallel comparison with scientific discovery of the atom. The idea, basically, is this: the discovery of the atom in chemistry enabled scientists to account for the apparent paradox that elements can be so different—resulting in the diversity of substances in the world—yet behave in such similar ways. Chemists deduced that elements differ simply in the way this most basic building block of matter (the atom) was combined. Thus, elements are all the same because they are all made of atoms, and yet they are different because the atoms combine in different ways contributing to a diversity of elements in the world. In the same way, Chomsky's discovery of linguistic parameters—the basic building block of languages—enabled linguists to account for the apparent paradox that languages are similar enough to allow translation of sense, but so different that computerized translators are not effective. Under the parametric theory of languages, languages are different because they choose different combinations of these same basic parameters, just as compounds are different because they choose different combinations of these atoms.

I.III Scientific Paradigms

This brings me to an important explication of the theoretical framework underscoring my method of scientific research. Kuhn, in *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*, conceptualizes science as research under a specific “paradigm”—or framework of theory and application, which creates a coherent tradition. An example of such a paradigm would be Ptolemaic astronomy—the theoretical framework of a sun-centered solar system. Research advances as scientists continue to study the subject under the paradigm's established assumptions or “intertwined theoretical and methodological belief that permits selection, evaluation, and criticism” (Kuhn 1996: 17). The study of chemistry under the paradigm created by the discovery of atoms represents another example, as does Chomskian linguistics.

For Kuhn, a scientific revolution occurs with the phenomenon of what he calls a paradigm shift. This occurs when scientists, accustomed to studying under a given paradigm, discover a new theoretical framework which accounts for new or different data. The shift to the study of chemistry under the “atomic” paradigm, or the shift from a Copernican to Ptolemian paradigm of astronomic research, represent such a paradigm shift or scientific revolution. Like a scientific gestalt-switch, a scientific revolution also allows scientists to see the same data in new or different ways (Kuhn 1996: 111):

Led by a new paradigm, scientists adopt new instruments and look in new places. Even more important, during revolutions scientists see new and different things when looking with familiar instruments in places they have looked before. It is rather as if the professional community had been suddenly transported to

another planet where familiar objects are seen in a different light and are joined by unfamiliar ones as well.

Linguistic study under the paradigm of Chomsky's universal grammar and parametric theory also represents such a revolution. Suddenly, linguists are interpreting data in new and different ways and garnering new data under a theory of language based on the idea that all humans have a genetic "instinct" for language, and language diversity occurs due to the choices different languages make between a set number of parameters. Chomskian linguists are interested in studying diverse languages and dialects in an effort to eventually develop, as Baker proposes, a "periodic table of languages." Ideally, such a formulation would allow linguists to account for all linguistic variety as well as explain the relevance and interconnectedness of parameters. I realized that Verlan had not yet been studied under this paradigm.

One common area of linguistic exploration of this type, is studying a language, or an aspect of a language, which seems to have irregularities in terms of Chomsky's theory. This language, for example, would seem to violate the regular nature and rule-base of Universal Grammar. The goal, then, would be to find a pattern—an explanation—for this apparent irregularity under the paradigm of Universal Grammar and parametric theory. This is exactly what Kuhn proposes as the goal of "normal science" (Kuhn 1996: 24):

Normal science consists in the actualization of that promise, an actualization achieved by extending the knowledge of those facts that the paradigm displays as particularly revealing, by increasing the extent of the match between those facts and the paradigm's predictions, and by further articulation of the paradigm itself.

One basis for my realization that Verlan had not, in fact, been studied under the Chomskian paradigm was in a series of emails with a prominent linguist who had studied Verlan. I presented, to her, my proposal to study Verlan's effect on morphosyntaxis by creating infixes and feminine markers and apparent word order violations¹. In her reply she brought up a series of interesting questions:

In terms of infixes and feminine markers, what kind of evidence would we need to claim that the existence of these markers in two or three words can be viewed as a phenomenon with general influence on the linguistic system? Could it simply be limited to particular fixed items that are created and learned as exceptions/tokens rather than types? At what point can we say that the

¹ These are examples of apparent irregularities under my established paradigm which I argue need to be accounted for. They will be further explained in a subsequent section.

presence of these individual items has a general effect on how speakers view the system of suffixation/affixation/infixation?

My response to this was, I do not know, but I would like to know. Does French permit that these irregularities become widespread enough to be considered as “features” of Verlan? And, if so, what would be the impact on the language? This was exactly what I meant by accounting for apparent irregularities. However, it seemed that Doran was indicating that these questions were irrelevant. As a sociolinguist, she was interested in studying what was occurring, and why—which social factors contributed to Verlan’s existence, and how were these reflected in the language. These are incredibly interesting and informative endeavors and research, but outside of the scientific paradigm I am proposing, and missing an important possibility in linguistic research—that is, the usefulness of interesting linguistic variation (often rooted in social causes) to a more formal linguistic analysis. As Baker (2001: 18) says:

Language is intimately tied to culture, and the question of the commensurability of languages is related to the question of the commensurability of cultures...Much of our higher thought processes as well as our culture is intertwined with our language. Just what these interrelationships are is very difficult to tease apart, but there is no doubt that much of our conscious thought and cultural knowledge is framed in the medium of language. The same tensions between similarity and difference arise...Are two cultures basically variations on a common theme, or do they represent deeply different ways of perceiving and thinking about the world? If the latter, then are they incommensurable and hence incapable of truly understanding each other?...Anthropologists thinking about culture tend to emphasize difference whereas cognitive psychologists thinking about thought tend to emphasize similarity. One of the charms of linguistics² is that it stands at the crossroads of these two intellectual traditions where neither emphasis can easily be ignored.

The merits of studying Verlan from a formal linguistic paradigm centered in morphological or syntactic analysis is that it can be used to further understand the phenomenon of language as such. Further examples and linguistic divergences are used to further develop and nuance a Universal Grammar theory of languages and the language instinct that is the root of all human linguistic communication.

² When baker says “linguistics” here, he means formal linguistic study, not really sociolinguistics which is often linked to anthropological studies.

I.IV Verlan Background

Natalie Lefkowitz, a linguist with a specific research interest in Verlan, commented that while engaging with her students during a Fulbright teaching fellowship in Paris, she “was alarmed to discover that the language [her] students were speaking was beyond [her] comprehension” (Lefkowitz 1991; 1). Paradoxically, while the tendency for innovation in communication is to facilitate the spread of information, this communication lapse is one of the goals of Verlan speakers. Verlan originated in working class immigrants to France in the 1980s. The children of such immigrants, unable to identify with France or their country of origin, used Verlan as a way to cope with their conflicted social identity. Lefkowitz (1992: 2) says:

They are caught between societies and have been forced to create their own culture; one based on music, bandes dessinées ‘comic strips,’ and Verlan in an attempt to validate the culture of the banlieue ‘suburb’.

Description of the Phenomenon

Verlan is, at its simplest linguistic explanation, a language game characterized by an inversion of syllables. So, *femme* becomes *meuf*, *cit * becomes *t ci*, and *branch * becomes *ch bran*. The name itself, *verlan*, is an inversion of *l’envers*, or, “the inverse.”

The process of verlanization of words is often discussed in terms of the number of syllables in a word. Thus, the inversion process takes on slightly different characteristics in each of disyllabic, trisyllabic, and monosyllabic words (Mela 1997)³.

Disyllabic words

Disyllabic words are the most easily verlanized. With few exceptions, disyllabic words follow a simple reversal of the first and second syllable⁴.

Examples:

- (1) a. Fauch  [foʃe] —ch fau [ʃefo]
- b. Putain [pyt ]—tainpu [t py]
- c. M chant [meʃ ]—chantme [ʃ me]
- d. Copain [k p ]—painco [p k ]

Trisyllabic words

³ The processes of word formation as outlined in Mela (1997) and others have more complicated nuances—I present a simplified version so that the reader will have a general knowledge of the subject. The specifics, often complicated by constraints of French phonology, are not of specific interest to this study.

⁴ In presenting Verlan data, I will present the Standard French word with its phonetic transcription, followed by the likely Verlan spelling following SF conventions along with the phonetic transcription of the Verlan. As noted, Verlan is a spoken language, so the written form is not attested.

Trisyllabic inversions are significantly less common and usually involve first a reduction of the word to two syllables and a subsequent inversion. However, as is the case in the last three examples, there are trisyllabic words that retain all three syllables in their verlanized form.

Examples:

- (2) a. Travelo [tɾavelo]—vlotra [vlotɾa]
- b. Batterie[batɾi]—triebat [tɾiba]
- c. Rigolo [ɾigɔlo]—golori [gɔlori]
- d. Corrida [kɔɾida]—ridaco [ɾidakɔ]
- e. Verité [verite]—téveri [teveri]

Monosyllabic words

Closed and open monosyllabic words follow different rules for verlanization. For closed syllable words, speakers add a muted [ɔ] sound to the end of the word and invert the now two syllables (Mela 1997):

Examples:

- (3) a. Mec [mɛk]—keum [kəmɛ]
- b. Tête [tɛtɔ]—tetê [tɛtɛ]
- c. Bite [bitɔ]—tebi [tɛbi]

However, for open syllable words, the speaker simply reverses the consonant–vowel structure of the word.

Examples:

- (4) a. Bon [bɔ̃]—ob [ɔ̃b]
- b. Fou [fu]—ouf [uf]
- c. Moi [mwa]—oim [wam]

Lexicon: Which words are Verlanized?

Certain grammatical categories have been found more likely than others to undergo verlanization. Commonly verlanized words include nouns, imperative exclamations, intensifying predicates, negative exclamations and exclamative and nominal phrases (Lefkowitz 1992, Bachmann and Basier 1984, and Paul 1985). Also, Verlan speakers are more likely to invert major or content words—such as nouns, verbs, adjectives, and adverbs—instead of minor or function words (clitics, articles, prepositions, and pronouns) (Lefkowitz 1992). Interestingly, there is a category of seemingly minor words that frequently undergo verlanization—personal disjunctive pronouns in emphatic position (i.e. toi, moi) (Lefkowitz 1992).

It has also been found that some words are Verlanized or not, depending on the speaker. These more flexible word categories include subject pronouns, possessive pronouns, and

demonstrative adjectives. Consequently, linguists have varied on whether they classify these as major or minor words in Verlan (Lefkowitz 1992).

Another interesting thing about word category in Verlan, is the tendency for words to undergo a shift of category in their inverted form. For example, the adjective *branché* (“plugged in”), becomes a noun *les chébrans* (the people who are “plugged in”) (Lefkowitz 1992).

Semantics

Another interesting attribution of Verlan is the semantic transformation of the verlanized word forms. Racial epithets are softened of their derogatory meaning, whereas other words are often seen as more emotionally charged, or stronger. For example, *deum*, the inverted form of word for “shit”, is considered to be much more aggressive than its standard French counterpart. Likewise, *chantmé* is considered to be more “nasty” than *méchant*, and *vaismot* is considered to be more “bad” than *mauvais* (Lefkowitz 1991).

Phonology

Phonological analysis of Verlan has centered on phonological restrictions on syllabic order. Basically, the phonological transformation required after syllabic inversion to make the word pronounceable by French speakers. One of the most recent advances is an analysis of phonological rules of Verlan through a formalization of the so-called “First Branch Principle” (Lefkowitz and Weinberger 1987). The First Branch Principle explains, according to Lefkowitz, why the verlan form of *moi* is [oim] instead of [awm]. The branching theory also provides, as Lefkowitz points out “evidence of the psychological reality of the syllable” (Lefkowitz 1991). Also studied is the tendency in Verlan for the sequence of sounds to change from consonant–vowel to vowel consonant construction and the associated phonetic modifications. Lefkowitz lists three: vowel lengthening, a marked pause before the word, and vowel opening (Lefkowitz 1991: 73).⁵

History and Social Research

Much of the knowledge base that I have of Verlan has been garnered through the sociolinguistic studies of Meredith Doran, specifically her 2002 dissertation. As discussed in my introduction, the focus of her research, while linguistically interesting, has been primarily social. In her dissertation, she, herself, notes, “...the approach to Verlan represented in this study is undergirded by a fundamentally social view of language.” After the fundamentals of word

⁵ Phonological discussion of Verlan is too in depth to be completely summarized here and outside of the scope of this paper, however, other notable observations include increased homophony among verlanized words, syllable insertion (metathesis), truncation of final syllables, and repetition or reduplication of a truncated form (Lefkowitz 1991).

formation (as presented above) were discovered, the research switched to a primarily social locus: namely the identity of speakers of Verlan.

Lefkowitz points out that the origins of Verlan are in the working class suburbs north of Paris. These areas, known as “La Zone”, are populated by immigrants and their children, some of which have seen or do not remember their parents’ country of origin, or have not been to the Paris city center. As a result, many do not speak French or their parents’ native tongue particularly strongly. Socially, as well as linguistically, they are torn between two cultures: the culture of their parents and French culture. In an article describing coping mechanisms and the construction of self-identity for these immigrant children, Meredith Doran describes a resultant “third space” for suburban youth (Doran 2004). In her article, Doran explains that the identity that these youth construct is one in which they are not-quite French and not-quite immigrants. Part of the distinction process is the inclusion of a “peer-group language” (i.e. Verlan) which marks who is inside and who is outside of the so-called third space. For the youth community, Verlan is “a language both created by, and belonging to, the local group...frequently referred to...as *notre langage a nous* (our language for us)” (Doran 2004: 104).

Linguists note that Verlan is most often used among the most “awful” students (Bachmann and Basier 1984: 178) and is connected with a perception of being the “bad boys” (Doran 2002: 43). The primary users are usually young men due to the connotations of a speaker being “tough” or “delinquent”, but—and especially more recently—it has become more likely to be used by young women as well (Doran 2002: 44). Use has also extended from the suburbs to the city center as urban youth outside of the original demographic began to use the game (Doran 2002).

However, while Verlan as it is today clearly originated within this community, the suburban youth community did not invent the French language game. According to Lefkowitz, word games such as palindromes and anagrams have been long entrenched in French popular culture, even as early as the late 17th century. In fact, she points to an article from 1690 in which the locution “jus vert” is verlanized and explained: “On dit, c’est verjus ou jus vert pour dire c’est la meme chose” (Fertiere (1690) from Lefkowitz 1991: 51).

There are further mentions of sparse evidence of an existence of Verlan through the 18th, 19th, and early 20th centuries, but the real proliferation of the phenomenon occurred with the difficult socioeconomic conditions and societal disorder, especially concerning Maghreb immigrants, in France in the 1980s (Lefkowitz 1991). The *banlieus*⁶, Paris’s suburban neighborhoods where the immigrants resided became a place of poverty, violence, and unrest, and Verlan became a social coping mechanism for the children of Maghreb immigrants.

⁶ While “la banlieue” is often described as a suburb, it is important to note the distinction between the American concept of “suburb” and the qualities of suburbs in France. These terms are switched from “inner-city” and “suburb.” American suburbs being “calm and safe residential areas which are actually positively ‘sheltered’ from the dangers and difficulties of our ‘inner-cities’”(Doran 2002; 107).

Separated from the wealth of the city center, the *banlieu* children began to speak a language markedly different from their Parisian counterparts (Doran 2002: 109). The reason for the differences has a geographical as well as ideological component. First, the suburbs were separated from mainstream society, so the contact between speakers from the banlieue versus speakers from the city was limited. Also, the variegated population in the suburbs allowed for contact between various linguistic groups (Doran 2002: 109). Secondly, the violent feelings and associations with the urban reorganization fostered a working-class rejection of everything it associated with the bourgeois class in Paris. Doran (2002:111) notes:

Thus, the use of the newly amalgamated “français populaire” of these marginalized suburban spaces became a linguistic means of resisting identification with an oppressive ruling class; it now served as a clear marker of membership in an excluded proletariat.

The Maghreb youth used Verlan to provide themselves with a sense of solidarity—a separate identity from the monolithic French norm (Lefkowitz 1991, Sloutsky and Black 2008).

Today, Verlan has taken on a more widespread usage. It has been incorporated from the Banlieue into mainstream Parisian youth culture similar to the way inner-city trends in America (the “gangster” look) has been adopted by some middle-class teenagers. The exact age of the speakers has been disputed, and some linguists indicate that age may be changing as a result of Verlan speakers getting older and continuing to use the word game (Bachmann and Basier 1984), but the literature generally agrees that Verlan speakers are between 13 and 25 years of age (Lefkowitz 1992, Bachmann and Basier 1984).

II. Research Proposal: Theoretical paradigms and Investigational points of departure

II.I French Morphology

Standard Colloquial French

Since, Verlan is primarily a spoken, and not written, phenomenon, it is necessary to examine its divergence from colloquial French, and not from written French. I will use the morphology of colloquial French as a starting point to examine Verlan’s morphological divergence in terms of gender marking and category marking of words.

First, I would like to explain how colloquial French differs from standard written French in the area of gender marking. Ball (2000) classifies gender flexion in written French into five types of transformations⁷:

1. Invariable words—these words do not inflect gender. (ex. aimable; jeune)
2. Addition of -e in the feminine form (ex. clair/clair(e))
3. Change of consonant and addition of -e in the feminine form (ex. public/publique)
4. Addition of consonant and addition of -e in feminine form (ex. favori/favorite)
5. Irregular changes—word does not follow any of the above formulations for feminine form (ex. beau/belle; vieux/vieille)

Ball (2000) differentiates these methods for forming feminine adjectives in formal French from the methods in colloquial spoken French. Gender flexion in colloquial spoken French contains first of all, a larger group of invariable adjectives since, for example, “*clair*” and “*clair(e)*” would be pronounced the same. Thus, the verbalized form would not reflect a change either (it would not make sense for it to create a phonetic ending where one does not exist). The words that are variable are usually varied by whether or not the final consonant is pronounced. Thus, the five different classifications become four (Ball 2000; 170)⁸:

1. Invariable forms: aimable [ɛmabl]; clair(e) [klɛʀ]
2. No final consonant in masculine: doux/douce [du]/[dus]; froid/froide [fʀwa]/[fʀwad]; favori/favorite [favɔʀi]/[favɔʀit]
3. Change of Consonant vif/vive [vif]/[viv]
4. Irregular forms : beaux/belle [bo]/[bɛl]; vieux/vieille [vjø]/[vjɛj]

In this study, I would like to examine the effect of verbalization on these different ways of inflecting gender; perhaps some are productive and others are not. Also, the case may be that as spoken French has already diverged from written French in having fewer changes for gender, perhaps with *verlan*, the further transition will be to eventually eliminate gender differences entirely.

Verlan

The reason that morphology in *verlan* is so curious is based on the fact that French is a language which depends primarily on suffixes for flexion (as seen above). French speakers are accustomed to looking (or listening) to the end of the word for gender, verb tense, and word

⁷ I have changed the name of Ball's fifth classification (and fourth in the following list of colloquial gender flexion), from “various other changes” to “irregular changes”.

⁸ I have included the phonetic transcription of the colloquial gender transformations since I am concerned with the spoken phenomenon.

category information. However, when a word is inverted, these suffixes are relocated to the middle of the word. The markers for gender, tense, and category are now infixes inside of the word.⁹ Can speakers still recognize these infixes as carrying their lexical information?

Category Markers

In French, there are certain morphological markers that appear as suffixes in a word, which indicate word category. For example, the ending “-eur” ([œr]) indicates “someone who__”. So, while “tirer” means “to shoot”, “un tireur” is “someone who shoots”.¹⁰ When, verlanized, these morphological markers fall in the middle of the word, so “tireur” ([tirœr]) becomes “reurti” ([rœrti]). It is difficult, in this form, to distinguish the root from the ending and to recognize [œ] as indicating a person. This raises the question: can these begin to become recognized enough to mark them for category as a suffix (or even an infix) and, furthermore, can they begin to be productive?

Other examples (Mela 1997: 28) include:

Standard French	English translation	Suffix	Standard French	Verlan
Sadique	Sadistic	-que	[sadik]	[diksa]
Flambeur	“high roller”	-eur	[flābœr]	[bœrflā]
Videur	“bouncer”	-eur	[vidœr]	[dœrvi]
Vicelard	Licentious	-ard	[vislar]	[slarvi]

Feminine markers

Another example of a morphological suffix that verlanization transforms into an infix is in the case of French feminine markers. I have already explained the process of gender marking in colloquial spoken French. As is the case with infixes word category markers in the verlanized form, gender markers also become infixes when words are inverted. Thus one finds (Mela 1991: 85):

- (5) a. copain [kɔpɛ̃]—painco [pɛ̃kɔ]
 b. copine [kɔpin]—pinco [pinkɔ]

⁹ Previous researchers have also documented infixation of gender, tense, and category markers, however, as the French process of verb inflection is complicated and affected by multiple variables (see Méla 1997), it is difficult to gauge its impact on Verlan. While interesting, the study of the impact of Verlan on infixes verb inflection would be best addressed in another study which could possibly draw on conclusions from this work.

¹⁰ English possesses these same morphological suffixes. For example, the suffix “-er” indicates “someone who___”. So, while “to shoot” indicates an action, “shooter” indicates the person who executes the given action.

- (6) a. français [frãse]— çaisfran [cɛfrã]
b. française [frãsez]— çaisefran [sezfrã]

There is also evidence of words which have a gender marker in colloquial spoken French, however, in verlan, instead of transferring the gender marker to the inside of the word, speakers will use the masculine form for both males and females. For example, the the French word “*chaud*” ([ʃo]), would remain [oʃ], in both feminine and masculine Verlan usage.

In this study I would like to search for further evidence of infixated feminine markers—when they are employed, when the male form suffices for both. My question is can we find more, and even if we can’t, could they be productive or at least recognizable as either a) the word they are, or b) the gender they are.

III. Summary of Research Questions

Is verlan morphology productive?

- a. In which expressions and with which adjectives do speakers naturally retain a feminine marker, and in which do they use the masculine form for both?
- b. Upon hearing verlan terms with a feminine infixation, which words sound “natural” for speakers?
- c. Are speakers capable of creating new adjectives using the feminine infixation? (New refers to any words, that the speaker had not heard used in the Verlan form).
- d. Same questions for infixated category markers.

IV. Methodology

To test the existence of, and possible productivity of morphological infixation markers of gender and category, and that of word order inversion, I will conduct a series of surveys with Verlan speakers. The surveys will consist of examples in which I 1) ask the speaker to “verlanize” a word or sentence, and 2) read my own “verlanized” word or sentence and question the speaker on its comprehensibility. The goal will be both to examine the mental representation that speakers have of the phenomenon and what is “allowed” or not in their mental dictionary, as well as gather new relevant morpho-syntactic data.

The questioning will be done orally, since verlan is a spoken, rather than written phenomenon. Therefore, I will be recording my conversations with speakers so that I will have it documented.

The purpose of this study is to examine the representation of Verlan in the speaker's mind, and to determine what is "grammatical" or "ungrammatical" within the context of Verlan. Therefore, it becomes necessary to define what is the basis for making these judgments. Steven Pinker explains that judging—in a linguistic sense—a sentence as grammatical, ungrammatical, or grammatical only in certain situations is not the same as the conventional grammar school definitions. I am not concerned with whether the Académie Française would permit or condone the utterance of such a sentence (which surely it would not), but rather what is allowed or not by the basic constraints of a language based on how it is formulated in the speaker's mind. That is, a sentence would be judged ungrammatical if speakers "tend to avoid the sentence, cringe when they hear it, and judge it as sounding odd" (Pinker 2007: 35).

While these criteria may sound subjective, especially for an empirical study, linguists have found that subjects are remarkably intuitive about their linguistic judgments. Based on the way language is represented in a speaker's mind, its development based on the rules of Universal Grammar, there are certain things which objectively "work" or not—and speakers are acutely aware of this. Thus, findings are consistent across a wide range of speakers of a given language, and empirically useful.

Description of survey subjects and justification of location

The above characterization of the garnering of this type of linguistic data has important implications on sample size for subject surveys: the number of research subjects need not be large. The project is not one of statistical inquiry but of a mental representation that will occur for all—or mostly all—speakers of Verlan. Linguistic data for studies such as this one is valued qualitatively rather than quantitatively. Interviewing two, two hundred, or two thousand Verlan speakers, I would expect to find the same results. I have decided to interview around ten speakers. This, I believe, will be sufficient to account for anomalies, but still a manageable number to allow for quality in the data I gather. I expect my findings to be consistent across the subject sample.

The subjects will be young (between 13 and 25 years) as these are the prominent Verlan speakers. Also, even though the phenomenon began in the Paris suburbs, it is now widespread among the youth within Paris as well. As the suburbs have been a source of violence and social unrest in the near past, Paris would be the safer location for my research. The data, however, will be unaffected as long as I am speaking with French speakers who are also habitual Verlan users. Logistically, Paris is also more convenient because I have a contact, Esmeralda Duran, who is studying at *Les Sciences Politiques* in Paris. She has acquaintances who use Verlan as well as a familiarity with Paris that could help me both find more subjects to research, and navigate the area.

Final project

After conducting my research, the final project would be presented in the form of a paper. I am also submitting proposals for conferences at McGill University and Gordon College where I would give a 20 minute presentation of my findings. Depending on the conclusions I draw from the research, this could be submitted for publication in a scholarly journal. I will also submit it with my graduate school applications, and present my findings to the Foreign Languages department here at SMU¹¹.

V. Appendix

¹¹ I owe this idea to Alberto Pastor, my research mentor, and an immense help in the development of this proposal, and will continue to be a resource through the remainder of the project

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Budget

Hostel for 8 days

St. Christopher's Paris	41.97/night x 8 nights	\$335.76
Pavillon Porte de Versailles	53.63/night x 8 nights	\$429.04
Demeure des Tilleuls	62.18/night x 8 nights	\$497.44
Hotel France Albion	66.84/night x 8 nights	\$534.72

Average cost: **\$449.24**

Food for 8 days

3 meals/day	\$30/day x 8 days	\$240
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Roundtrip Air Fare

American Airlines	\$869.60
Delta Airlines	\$960.50
Continental Airlines	\$1089.00

Average cost: **\$973.03**

Digital Recording device

\$70

Book allowance

Verlan dictionaries	\$30
Journal	\$5
Paris Map	\$10
<i>Talking Backwards Looking Forwards: The French Language Game, Verlan</i> (Lefkowitz)	\$82.99

Research Costs

The American Library in Paris \$14/day x 5 days	\$70
Bibliotheque Sainte-Genevieve	FREE

Transportation

Metro pass	
Paris and Suburbs 5 day pass	\$83.80
Metro weekly pass	\$30.00
Taxi to and from airport	\$200

Thank you gifts for subjects/research contacts

\$50

**I already have a valid passport

TOTAL COST \$2294.06

Timeline

March 5—leave DFW for Paris

March 6—arrive in Paris, meet Esmeralda for introductions

March 7–8—orient myself with the city, find areas for research subjects, visit libraries, and visit the suburbs for a social context

March 9–13—Meet with 1 interviewee per day, making sure to record all conversations. Extra work and revisit suburbs as needed.

March 14—Leave Paris for DFW

March 15—arrive in Dallas

March 27—Conference at Gordon College if accepted

April and May—prepare final research paper and submit to journals prepare and execute presentation at SMU