

Adolecents' multilingual punning and identity play
in a French *cit *

Chantal Tetreault, University of Texas at Austin

AAA Meetings 2000

In this paper I explore collaborative rounds of puns and insults among Arabic-French bilingual youth in a low-income housing project or *cit *. I argue that these performances contextualize Arabic-French identity among French adolescents of North African descent through the use of resources from North African, French, and American language and culture. My analysis of adolescents' linguistic and cultural play addresses performance as a means to move beyond conceptualizing "identity" as "a category that individuals inhabit" [after Bucholtz's critique 1999:7] to analyzing how modes of self-presentation are interactionally achieved. My goal is thus to address how shared categories and symbols for identification emerge through adolescents' collaborative punning performances. In multilingual puns and insults among these adolescents, what appears outwardly as linguistic "nonsense" is a sense-laden system of indexicality that points to local, national, and transnational cultural and linguistic codes, and thus improvises multiple and overlapping systems of identification (or meaning).

Perhaps the most purely non-sensical example of this type of linguistic and cultural pun is the game "hachek," a competitive word duel played by two participants. To instigate a game, one speaker merely says "hachek," an Arabic word that roughly means "I'm sorry." The second player must respond with a word that rhymes with "hachek." Common replies include French words such as "biftek" ('steak' or 'muscle man') and American loan words such as "milkshake" and "Star Trek," but may extend to French cultural references such as "Toulouse Lautrec," the impressionist painter. The joke is to juxtapose one odd referent after another and the object is to literally have the last word—the person who can reply the most incongruous terms in succession is the winner.

Like the more elaborate multilingual puns and insults that I will explore below, this seemingly incoherent word game is not purely linguistic "play." Indeed, the

seemingly non-sensical stream of words is effective because the players know why the terms don't fit together conceptually and furthermore why they don't make "sense" together on a culturally symbolic level. For example, although the game starts with the Arabic word "hachek," players never use other Arabic terms to rhyme. Rather, every subsequent word consistently switches into French or English, highlighting the disparate quality of the initial Arabic term within the immediate linguistic context. On a symbolic level, the successive Arabic, French, and English terms function as emblems (or icons) that represent the disparate but intertwined cultural systems to which these adolescents belong—Arabic culture, French culture, and American capitalist culture.

Even beyond the game, the word "hachek" functions as an emblem of identity among Arabic-French youth because of their purported "misuse" of the term—proof, according to their parents, that these adolescents use a corrupted form of Arabic. Their parents, mostly first generation North African immigrants, use "hachek" to maintain propriety after mentioning an unseemly topic, such as needing to use the bathroom. In contrast, second generation adolescents use "hachek" to facilitate teasing a peer without angering them—kids alternately translated the term to me as "I'm sorry" or "I'm joking." Through adolescents' re-appropriation of this traditional politeness formula to negotiate responsibility about teasing, "hachek" takes on a performative function in adolescent interactions that overrides the traditional meaning of the word and contributes to an alternative, "youthful" code of conduct.

Like the interactional and cultural innovation that adolescents demonstrate with their new uses of "hachek," collaborative bouts of punning and insults draw from multiple cultural referents and linguistic resources. In the first example I will discuss today, adolescents use lyrics lifted from a Daniel Balavoine song "Je m'appelle Henri" ("My name is Henri"). Daniel Balavoine was a French singer who was popular in the late 70s and early 80s, and who died in 1985. As such his music is part of "classic" French rock that is still played on mainstream radio stations across the country. In a creative subversion of the original song's meaning, three bilingual Arabic-French adolescents, Sihem (F, 14), Sabrina (F, 15), and Momo (M, 13), take turns inserting each others' mothers' names in the "Henri" slot of the lyrics. In so doing, they transform the song lyrics into a performative vehicle for the mother insults that are ubiquitous among

adolescents and children in the neighborhood. Mother insults are also commonly used in Arabic across North Africa and the Middle East generally. As well, they are prevalent in the American and French rap that is popular in the neighborhood.

Example 1: Collaborative Instigating

- 1 Sa “je me presente”
 “I introduce myself”
- 2 Si shoush
 shhhh
- 3 M “je m’ap – pelle”
 “my name is”
- 4 Si Fatna
 Fatna
- 5 Sa je m’appelle [[Fatna
 my name is [[Fatna
 Si [[je-
 [[I-
- 6 Si je voudrais bien avoir un petit chat
 I would like to have a little cat
- 7 Sa [laughs]
- 8 Si bonjour Aicha
 hello Aicha

In this example, the words “I introduce myself” instigates a round of playful teasing in which one participant’s initial utterance is completed by a second participant, resulting in collaboratively achieved rhyming pair parts. For example, in the first four turns of this exchange, Sabrina (“Sa”), Momo (“M”), and Sihem (“Si”) collaborate to form the pair part “I introduce myself, my name is Fatna.” Sihem’s choice to fill the “Henri” slot with Momo’s mother’s name changes the openly collaborative character of the exchange into an utterance directed at Momo, since his mother is now implicated. Sabrina chooses to align herself with Sihem’s bid to tease Momo by repeating the full second line of the pair part “My name is Fatna” [line 5] and Sihem adds on another rhyming pair part “I would like to have a little cat” [line 6]. Here, the French word “cat” (or ‘chat’) not only rhymes with Fatna, but is also an allusion to Sabrina’s mother, whose name is Aïcha and whose nickname is “Aïcha, le chat” or ‘Aïcha the cat’. Sabrina responds to this clever turn of the teasing on her by laughing and then Sihem makes a direct reference to Sabrina’s mother by saying “Hello Aïcha” in line 8.

This example of punning demonstrates linguistic and cultural play on several levels, primarily the referential level in that “cat” is used to rhyme with “Aïcha,” but also to refer to Sabrina’s mother. At the discursive level, the insertion of their peer’s mother’s name, “Fatna” and “Aïcha,” into a classic French rock song is an example of innovative cultural punning in which participants breach the symbolic borders between French-ness (via the song) and Arab-ness (via the mother insult and their mothers’ Arabic names). Finally, the highly collaborative quality to these performances show that it is not primarily verbal competition that participants are concerned with, but also constructing a layering of meanings, a jointly achieved juxtaposition of cultural puns and plays on words.

The next example combines many of the same elements of the first example, but participants primarily use Arabic as a resource to improvise rhyming insults.

1 M Wasinia, elle fait caca
 Wasinia, she’s shitting

- 2 Si ah ha [fake laugh]
ah ha
- 3 M parce qu'elle a du **khora** sur la tête
because she has **shit** on her head
- 4 Si Fatna, caca **kharia**
Fatna, **shitty** shit
- 5 ? [XX **kathir**]
[XX **a lot**]
- 6 M Ah hem!
Ah hem!
- 7 Sa je me presente
I introduce myself
- 8 M je m'appelle Aïcha
my name is Aïcha
- 9 Si Fat- na!
Fat- na!
- 10 Sa je m'appelle Fatna
my name is Fatna
- 11 Si qui est là? oh la petite **khahaba**
who's there? oh the little **whore**
- 12 M gi- gitane!

g- gypsy!

In a similar fashion to the last example, the three participants engaging in teasing by insulting each other's mothers using puns and rhymes. Here, however, Arabic loan words are the central resource for the competitive performance. For example, Momo instigates the teasing exchange by claiming of Sihem's mother "Wasinia, elle fait caca" or 'Wasinia, she's shitting' [line 1] and continues "because she has shit on her head," using the Arabic word for 'shit' [line 2]. In this pair part, Momo constructs a pun by using the words for "shit" from French and Arabic. Sihem responds in like fashion by recycling the two words, claiming "Fatna, caca kharia" thus calling Momo's mother a "shitty shit" in line 4. Sihem, however, makes a rhyme with the two words by using the adjectival form of the Arabic term, "kharia." As in the previously example, the French song "I call myself Henri" is taken out to instigate teasing, first by Sabrina who starts "I introduce myself" [line 7] and then by Momo who finishes the phrase and inserts Sabrina's mother's name "My name is Aïcha" [line 8]. Sihem aligns herself with Sabrina by countering "Fatna" [line 9] and Sabrina then reiterates the second pair part of the song's phrase using Momo's mother's name: "my name is Fatna" [line 10]. Sihem gets inserts another rhymed insult directed at Momo by adding on to Sabrina's last turn with the second pair part: "who's there? oh the little **whore**" or "khahaba" [line 11]. Momo breaks the pattern with the exclamation "gypsy" in a conventional direct insult [line 12].

In this exchange, Arabic loan words become the central resource for teasing, evidenced by the use of the words "khora" (shit), "kharia" (shitty), and "khahaba" (whore). In this and in other exchanges among these adolescents, Arabic is often used to express the most insulting or taboo terms, indicating that the "in-group" language (after Gumperz 1982) mitigates the force of the insult. While the use of Arabic in this exchange is more akin to loan word usage than codeswitching as Gumperz defines it, the examples nonetheless demonstrate many similarities to what Gumperz calls "metaphorical" or "conversational" codeswitching [ibid.]. Specifically, participants' creative use of Arabic and French for constructing puns can be seen as building upon "participants' perception of two contrasting systems" [ibid.:65]. However, in the case of

this and the other examples, what is more apparent than the “juxtaposition...of passages of speech belonging to two different grammatical systems or subsystems” is the juxtaposition of several symbolic systems [ibid.:59].

The final example illustrates this symbolic juxtaposition through playfully using the French cultural icon and politician, Jean-Marie LePen, to joke about who Sihem’s ‘real’ father might be. Jean-Marie LePen is the head of the nationalist political party “The National Front” and has repeatedly called for the deportment of all immigrants from France.

Example 3: French Connections

1 Si tu connais pas le nom- le vrai nom de mon vrai père
you don’t know the name- the real name of my real father

2 Si c’est pas la peine
it’s not worth the trouble

3 Sa Jean-Marie
Jean-Marie

4 Si non, le vrai
non, the real one

5 M LePen! WHOO! [inhales laughing]
LePen! WHOO!

6 Sa Jean-Marie [singing in a whisper]
Jean-Marie

7 M tête de peine, faire d’la peine
ugly head, hurts you

[...] [unrelated conversation]

8 M il s'appelle Jean Charles de Savant
his name is Jean Charles de Savant

In this example, Sihem brags that the others will never guess the “real” name of her “real” father and so it’s “not worth trying” [lines 1-2]. Her use of the word “la peine” (lit. ‘the trouble’) elicits the playful response “Jean Marie” in reference to the phonological similarity between “la peine” and “Le Pen,” Jean Marie’s last name. The playful claim that Jean Marie LePen is Sihem’s father is effective because of its implausibility—since the leader of the French political party “the National Front” has called for the expulsion of all immigrants from France, and thus their parents as well. Momo takes up the word “peine” and puns an insult directed toward Sihem “tête de peine, faire d’la peine” in line 7. Here his use of “peine” in the first pair part is ambiguous as he could be saying “ugly head” or “Pen’s head.” However, either one, or both if this is an embedded pun, work well with the second pair part “hurts you.”

Momo’s final suggestion for the “real” identity of Sihem’s father in line 8 is another cultural pun that juxtaposes disparate cultural systems since “Jean Charles de Savant” is a French television host who ran the intellectual talk show “Mardi Ciel.” Both references serve to perform “Arabness” and “Frenchness” by creatively juxtaposing cultural icons and ideologies from dissimilar sources. However, through purposefully confounding symbolic referents, this and the other puns breach the “borders” of identity that are established in the dominant French discourse such as “Arab” vs. “European,” immigrant vs. French citizen, and national (French) culture vs. transnational culture.

In these examples, performances of identities and cultural categories emerge as a kind of “crossing,” to use Barrie Thorne’s term [1993]. The “borders” of multiple linguistic and symbolic systems are purposefully breached to create cultural crossroads from which to speak. While the “joke” in these puns is about discontinuity, the choice of referents serves to blur cultural boundaries, making a hybrid message that only

participants with like backgrounds can understand – and thereby creating a new code for a unique identity. In this way, what seems to be “non-sense” to outsiders (including the ethnographer at first) is highly sense-laden for those “in” the know. Thus rather than show how adolescents’ performances of identity are context dependent, their punning demonstrates how contexts for identity are created through performance [after Bauman and Briggs, 1990].