"Trop clean pour toi": Investigating the Diverse Dynamics of English Language Borrowing in French Rap Music

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This paper evaluates English borrowing in French rap music in the contexts of mainland France and French-speaking Canada. English borrowing exists against a backdrop of systemic linguistic purism, such as a 1994 French law requiring that at least 40 percent of songs played on air be in French, "[stemming] the encroachment of English into French culture" [5]. Literature in sociolinguistics has evaluated non-standard language use in French rap more broadly but lacks fine-grained analysis of English borrowing. The author categorizes and contextualizes computationally extracted English borrowings through a novel lexical subcategorization framework that anchors these borrowing practices in discrete sociocultural contexts. The study finds that French rappers strategically integrate English elements into their songs as a means of resistance and identity assertion. In France, where linguistic hegemony prevails, English borrowings are syntactically limited but semantically diverse. Constructions range from noun phrases to reinterpretations of idioms, with occasional code-switching. On the other hand, in a case study of Canadian French rap, Franglais emerges as fluid code switching that reflects the region's mature linguistic heterogeny. The author argues that by challenging linguistic purism with non-standard language practices, rappers are asserting translinguistic identities and amplifying marginalized communities. Overall, the findings underscore the importance of empowering non-standard language use in music, as it fosters cultural representation and linguistic evolution.

Keywords: borrowing, linguistic purism, English, French, French rap, sociolinguistics, computational linguistics, linguistics, non-standard language, France, Canada

Introduction: A Rap Practice That Transcends Standardized Language

French rap music is a colorful genre that has evolved greatly in the last few decades. Since its inception in the 1990s, its artists have aimed to "reassess French national history and national self-perception" [1]. This sentiment persists in today's French rap, which is now undeniably centered around the lived experience in *les banlieues*, an almost untranslatable French word referring to lower-middle class communities within suburban housing installations. These communities are highly linguistically and culturally diverse, and many inhabitants are second-generation immigrants. There, rap music has become an essential means of identity performance, which is often mediated by non-standard French. Non-standard French includes the language game of *verlan* (systematic word inversion), various other forms of French slang, and foreign language borrowing or code-switching. For an illustrative example, within the popular song CANADA by French rapper 1PLIKÉ140, I located five major instances of non-standard French occurring within ten seconds:

C'est les quartiers d'France, <u>ça s'la fout</u>[1] pour un 'ça vient d'où?' (Pour un 'ça vient d'où?')	These are the French districts, <u>fighting</u> upon a 'where'd you come from?'
<u>What's you gonna do</u>[2] si <u>mes gars</u>[1] prennent ta Canada	<u>What's you gonna do</u> if <u>my guys</u> take your Canada [referring to the brand Canada Goose]
Location toute l'année mais t'as <u>walou</u>[3], en vrai, t'as <u>nada</u>[4] [2]	Rental all year but you've <u>nothing</u>, you've <u>nothing</u> [chart rank #25, my translation]

1. French slang
2. English code-switching
3. Maghrebi Arabic borrowing
4. Spanish borrowing

Notice how within these lyrics, 1PLIKÉ140 seamlessly weaves non-standard French from diverse sources, constructing a speech act

with remarkable rhetorical variety. My research solely focuses on English language borrowings in French rap, which occur at a high frequency.

Background: Institutional Linguistic Purism in France and Eastern Canada

Since sociocultural context influences these rappers' relationships with language, I will frame my analysis in terms of two particular genre spheres where French rap is most prominent: those of mainland France and eastern, French-speaking Canada. The dominant culture in both genre spheres exert high degrees of linguistic purism, or social pressure to adhere to what is deemed pure French. Non-standard French thus entails any deviation from the prescribed "grammar, syntax, vocabulary and pronunciation" [3, p. 282]. The act of English borrowing particularly upsets French language authorities. In 2013, *L'Académie Française*, the de facto ruling body of European French, published a manifesto called *À la reconquête de la langue française* (Reconquering the French language). Within it, its Perpetual Secretary Hélène Carrère d'Encausse wrote, "*La langue française est … menacée … par la langue anglaise qui insidieusement la dévore de l'intérieur*" ("The French language is menaced … by the English language, which is insidiously devouring it from the inside") [4, para. 7]. Rich in pathos, the personifying language gives a grotesque mental image. Carrère d'Encausse paints the desperate plight of standard French, urging the public to dedicate to preserving it.

These sentiments of linguistic purism boil down into the music industry, challenging the opportunities and perceptions of French rappers within greater society. In France, a 1994 law requires that 40 percent of all songs played on air are in the French language, in part to "to stem the encroachment of English into French culture" [5]. French radio stations protested an amendment to the law with a day-long boycott in 2015, stating that the record industry was using language preservation as a thin veil to further its economic interests. I believe that while this law most directly concerns foreign music imports, it establishes a dangerous precedent at home in the form of a dividing line on what constitutes sufficient French-language content. It would also work to exclude "homegrown artists increasingly choosing to sing in English to boost their commercial appeal," as France 24 also states [5]. Later, I will establish that deviations from standard French reflect more than just commercial opportunity, rather an ongoing process of identity negotiation.

On the subject of dividing lines, music industry authorities in eastern Canada attempt to limit the appearance of English in new works, while Franglais, the fluid mixing of French and English, so well defines this region's language identity. Furthermore, according to Canadian social anthropologist Bob White, the practice of Franglais "may be emerging as an aesthetic marker for the sub-genre of Québécois rap" [6, p. 963]. Under a 30-year-old rule in Québec, a certain $18,000 government-funded grant for emerging musicians can only be awarded if the project's lyrical content is at least 70 percent French. In 2016, the prominent hip-hop band Dead Obies lost out on the grant when their album ended up being 55 percent French and 45 percent English [7]. I tasked myself with how English borrowing plays into this sociolinguistic tension, in which French rappers so strongly identify with non-standard language use and position themselves relative to a dominant culture that wields purist language ideologies. I discovered that by borrowing English words, French rappers are establishing translinguistic identities and challenging narratives of linguistic purism. I seek to demonstrate this by locating and categorizing English borrowings and illuminating their lyrical and social contexts.

But first, I must showcase scholars' existing approaches and establish a research gap around the nature and significance of English borrowing and code-switching. Prior literature has failed to reflect the depth of the practice, motivating my computational primary source research which located English borrowings on recent Top 100 rap charts in France and Canada. This primary data helped me construct a novel lexical subcategorization framework for English borrowings on the mainland French rap charts, which I will use to illuminate the practice within that genre sphere. In Canada, limited song data necessitates a case study on how one Québécois rapper, FouKi, employs Franglais for his own identity construction. After my theoretical treatment of English borrowing in mainland French rap and Franglais in French Canadian rap respectively, I will move to situate these borrowings in their sociolinguistic contexts and argue an emergent, unifying rhetorical significance.

Literature Review: Establishing the Need for More Refined Categorization

Before I enter my analysis, I would like to position myself relative to the work of several researchers who investigate English as it appears in French rap music. European sociolinguist Martin Verbeke performs quantitative lexicographic analysis on non-standard language frequency in French rap. He has considered categories such as rappers' associated nationalities, cities, Parisian suburbs, decades, and subgenres. While Verbeke's methodology of lexicographic analysis can produce exact percentages regarding the frequencies of non-standard language categories within a lyrical corpus, it is too broad to offer nuance to the practice of English borrowing. However, this is not to say that subcategorization of English word appearances has never been attempted. French literature scholar Skye Paine provides a novel framework by dividing English borrowings into the categories of "the useful and the ornamental," meaning essential and cosmetic [8, p. 63]. Through my primary research, I discovered that these categories proved utterly insufficient to the present practice of English borrowing, so this is where I identify the gap in existing literature. I will adapt the practice of lexicographic analysis and supplement it with subcategorizations, which I believe more accurately reflect the dynamic practice of English borrowing in mainland French rap music.

Since I equally value the social implications of the practice, I consulted research with more qualitative, socially situated analyses, beginning with that of French-specialized linguist Samira Hassa. She examines the social motivations behind English and Arabic borrowings and verlan in French rap. However, I found that Hassa reductively characterizes non-standard language occurrences as vectors for discussions of violence, drug culture, and other *banlieue* delinquency [9, p. 58]. In my own corpus, I observed borrowings with stylistic purposes beyond those that Hassa enumerates, which further reflects the research gap. In his genre-based paper, Verbeke adapts symbolic classifications for American rap music videos from scholars Conrad et al. to create the following qualitative framework for analyzing French rap music videos: "materialism…, misogyny…, violence…, political awareness…, expression of culture…, disaffection with mainstream society…, [and] group unity" [10, p. 55]. I appreciate that this qualitative categorization framework is much less socially isolated than Paine's. However, none like it has yet been

applied to rap lyrics, which is exactly what I aim to do with my analysis.

Researchers in the domains of sociolinguistics and cultural anthropology have aimed to deconstruct the language practice of Franglais in French rap, categorizing English influences. White builds upon Myers-Scotton's Matrix Language-Frame model of code-switching, which establishes a dominant (matrix) language that provides syntax and a subordinate (embedded) language which provides content morphemes [6]. His basic unit of analysis is the complementizer projection, referring to both the underlying syntactic structure of an instance of borrowing and the overlaid morphemes that provide content or establish relations. White chooses the 17-song album *Montréal $ud* by Dead Obies from 2013 as a representative corpus and identifies nearly 2,000 complementizer projections within it, concluding with a high-level interpretation of the syntactic dynamics of the Franglais that appears. He argues that existing anxieties around how Franglais challenges the future of French are unfounded, as English code-switching seems to exist primarily for cosmetic aims and for these rappers to establish themselves as "creative agents or as linguistic innovators" [6, p. 964]. The particularities of Canadian Franglais necessitate this more generalized frame of analysis, as it often involves both French borrowings into English and English borrowings into French. For mainland French rap where French structure dominates, the Matrix Language Frame model reduces to a single case, which would demand a more subdivided framework. While White's methodology is attentive to the depth of Franglais, his lyrical corpus is a single nine-year-old rap album, which is outdated and too narrowly scoped. For both genre spheres, I will analyze English borrowings by applying subcategorization frameworks upon currently relevant lyrical data from my primary research.

Methodology: Playing the Computational Card.

The lack of up-to-date and transparent analysis on the intricacies of English language borrowing in French language rap music motivated my research methodology as follows. I wanted to conduct an impartial inquiry on how English appears within this genre, so I began with the Shazam Top 100 rap chart in France from the week of April 8th–15th, 2022 to establish my raw dataset. I added song lyrics to it and removed non-French songs as they did not reflect my narrow research scope. I then wrote a C++ program to match English word occurrences from a 370,000-word lexicon, generating a large text file of English borrowings labeled by artist, title, and chart position. In the file, each occurrence of English borrowing was placed in its lyrical context. Occurrences were categorized by word, automatically contrasting how the same word can appear differently across popular songs. I manually filtered out thousands of false positives due to French-English cognates, according to dictionary presence and my own knowledge.

By returning to my original lyrical dataset and cross-referencing these contextualized matches, I constructed a 70-page document with the lyrics of 52 relevant target songs, bolding lines containing English borrowings as previously identified by my algorithm. Then, I tabulated the English words and assigned them one of several emergent semantic subcategories. Finally, I identified several representative lyrical samples for most of the subcategories and tabulated those separately. In the French-Canadian context, Shazam failed to distinguish between

Canadian provinces, allowing popular English songs to overshadow less accessible French works. Only two French-Canadian songs charted, which will motivate a case study for the Canadian genre sphere with lyrical data from the Québécois rapper FouKi. With two complete and regionally distinct datasets that inform the nature of these rappers' usages of English, I will place these borrowings within their sociocultural contexts and illustrate a unified rhetorical significance.

Analysis: Categorizing and Contextualizing English Borrowing

I argue in the case of France that while outright English code-switching is rare, English borrowings into French constitute a set of incredible semantic variety. I attempt to portray this depth with my lexical subcategorizations and subsequent analysis of select translated lyrical contexts. In Canadian French rap, I demonstrate that English appears in a much more advanced, freeform manner, either in isolation, as a matrix language with embedded French, or as a subordinate embedding in dominant French. In both genre spheres, I claim that as creative deviations from prescribed French, these English weavings constitute a unique resistance discourse by which rappers reclaim power from the dominant culture and assert nuanced, translinguistic identities. To build this argument, I will first present the English borrowing practices in each country from a theoretical perspective and then inject the social significance.

France: Qualitative Lexical Subcategorization and Contextual Analysis

Figure 1 provides my eleven novel subcategorizations for the English borrowings I observed on the mainland French rap charts as well as the words that informed each of them. To substantiate the nature of the practice for the reader and demonstrate its immense semantic variety, I will deconstruct several examples in their lyrical contexts. This first lyrical excerpt from "Méchant" by Niska contains borrowings from both the Violence and Bravado categories:

Téma ma gueule, téma <u>mon gun</u>, téma ma caisse j'sais qu'ils la veulent	Check my face, check <u>my gun</u>, check my car I know they want it
Tout pour le fric, niquer le buzz, dix kilos d'shit, dix kilos d'beuh [11]	All for the money, fuck <u>the buzz</u>, ten kilos of weed, ten kilos of herb [chart rank #18, Violence and Bravado]

Mixing multiple categories of borrowing within one couplet was a rare act within this lyrical corpus, but these acts demonstrate the comfortable command that rappers like Niska have over English as it pertains to their practice. Here, we see two English nouns with French articles, which is arguably the simplest form of borrowing. However, even this simple syntactic basis yields deep thematic contrast; each borrowing contributes to the unique rhetorical purpose of its surrounding line while respecting the French flow. The first line mixes integrity assertion and materialistic gloating, while the second line establishes Niska's value of dedication. Frameworks such as Paine's useful versus ornamental cannot capture

this contrast, which necessitates subcategorizations like mine. This next example from "Chic choc" by Bolémvn feat. Koba LaD includes an English slang verb and a noun borrowing referring to a woman:

On s'verra p't-être plus tard, j'delete si tu réponds pas (Aye, aye, aye)	We'll maybe see each other later, I'll <u>delete</u> if you don't respond (Aye, aye, aye)
P'tite <u>curly</u> (<u>Curly</u>), bien gé-char, comme j'les aime trop, gars (Comme j'les aime trop, gars, putain) [12]	Little <u>curly</u> (<u>Curly</u>), intoxicated, how I love them so much, man (How I love them so much, man, damn) [chart rank #5, English slang and Women]

While the prior example solely involved noun borrowings, Koba LaD's verse includes a present-tense borrowing of the English verb "delete." The fact that the French clause it begins continues in the present tense demonstrates the value of retaining grammatical consistency even when mixing languages. Just as in the prior example, the articles or pronouns that borrowings assume as necessary are in French, which may reflect a wish to fluidly integrate English words. Together, these nuances point to English borrowing in mainland French rap being an intricate yet systematic practice. However, it shares the pitfalls that concern the rap genre as a whole; the second noun borrowing above is objectifying, reducing women to an archetype by hairstyle.

Now, I would like to progress into even more advanced borrowings on the mainland France charts. This first example from "Attentat" by PLK contains one of the many reinterpreted idioms I observed, which I define as literal French translations of English idioms. The resultant expressions do not exist in French, which led me to categorize these French expressions as English borrowings despite the French content that pervades them.

Donne-moi ton numéro, donne-moi ton Snap' (yeah, yeah)	Give me your number, give me your Snap (yeah, yeah)
<u>Tu m'donnes le go</u>, t'inquiète, on s'capte (<u>tu m'donnes le go</u>) [13]	<u>You give me the go-ahead</u>, don't worry, we get each other (<u>you give me the go-ahead</u>) [chart rank #70, Reinterpreted idioms]

Depending on perspective, reinterpreted idioms are either one step before (yielding more continuity than) or beyond (built upon) complete code-switching. They emerge out of another code, yet rappers mask the gravity of the borrowing by translating it back into the dominant code. This additional translation affords blending along phonetic and morphemic lines, among others; PLK blends by reusing the French verb *donner* from the prior line. There is a balancing act here, as the decision to break into a complete English

Lexical Subcategorization	Matched English Borrowings
Rap genre self-reference	lyric, flow, beat, (rap) game, rapper, remix, track, music, freestyle
English curse words	fuck, bitch, shit, [diminutive N-word]
Materialism	ice, jack, jet, street wear, Air Max, money, cash, Off-White
Bravado	hardcore, boss, buzz [noun], buzzer [verb], king, top, numbers, rookie, god, gossip
Drugs	joint, mule, smoke, dope, coke, dealer [verb]
Women	baby, wife, curly, mama, bitch, la miss, kiss
Violence	(high) kick, uppercut, shooter [noun, verb], kill, gun, street fight
Marginalized *banlieue* life	street, gang, hood, skatepark, school, alien, life, night, business, story, showcase, ghetto youth, team
Miscellaneous English slang	fire, bae, cool, daddy, delete [verb: un-add]
Reinterpreted English idioms: literal French translations of English idioms	on pull up, donner le go, trop clean pour toi, faire le move, être love de, tu la love, ma best life, on/elle dead ça, une speed life, avoir le time, avoir le blues, fuck la vie d'artiste
Complete English code-switching	what you gonna do, big up, what's his/your name, to the top, don't know yet, (let's) get it, finish him, yeah that's great, call me, Hood Star Beats

Figure 1: Notable English borrowings as located in 52 songs of Shazam's Hip-Hop/Rap Top 100 chart in France from the week of April 8th–15th, 2022, with my own subcategorization and notes.

phrase constitutes automatic rhetorical significance. My last lyrical excerpt from "Dans ma paranoïa" by Jul showcases this reality:

Dites-moi si j'ai changé, dites-moi si je suis plus le même	Tell me if I changed, tell me if I'm no longer the same
Dis pas que tu veux me teste, non mais attends là, <u>what's your name?</u> [14]	Don't say you wanna test me, no but wait, <u>what's your name?</u> [chart rank #51, Complete code-switching]

Hearing this excerpt, either as performed or faithfully read, immediately makes the abrupt transition from French to English apparent. In this way, the complete code-switch disregards subtlety and outright defies French preservationist values. I only observed it in 10 of the 100 songs, with only five examples total occurring mid-verse, rather than in producer tags or intros. The utter rarity of the practice in mainland French rap reflects a social stigma whose severity demarcates the genre sphere, since it is exactly the code-switch that defines Canadian French rap.

Canada: A Case Study of the Fluid.Code-Switching of Lyrical Franglais

While the borrowings on the mainland French rap charts were occasional and usually limited to noun phrases, the Franglais in "Copilote" and "Bijou" by FouKi rapidly alternates within the spectrum of French, English upon dominant French, French upon dominant English, and complete English. Drawing from White's approach in accordance with the Matrix Language-Frame model, I counted occurrences of each category of Franglais in each song.

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	"Copilote" by FouKi	"Bijou" by FouKi
French	26 (59%)	47 (77%)
French-dominant	14 (32%)	7 (11%)
English-dominant	1 (2%)	6 (10%)
English	3 (7%)	1 (2%)

Figure 2: Per-category linewise summations of Franglais as it appears in FouKi's rap lyrics.
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The distribution of Franglais between the two songs is remarkably different. "Copilote" exhibits French-dominant code-mixing and English code-switching three times more often than "Bijou," but displays one-fifth the frequency of English-dominant Franglais. Well beyond the margin of error, each category distribution reflects conscious stylistic intentions, through which FouKi modulates the relationships between the two languages. Further research could illuminate these intentions, perhaps through direct interviews with rappers like FouKi. Either way, even this limited data shows that Franglais is not a monolithic practice, that it can assume many forms

under one speaker depending on the context. To demonstrate how the intermediary forms of Franglais take shape, I have selected three lyrical examples for each of the French-dominant and English-dominant code-mixing categories. I will begin by analyzing French-dominant Franglais.

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<u>Check-moi flex</u> si on s'croise dans rue [15]	<u>Check my flex</u> if we meet in the street [chart rank #41, French-dominant]
Tu fais partie des <u>cool kids</u> [15]	You're part of the <u>cool kids</u> [chart rank #41, French-dominant]
Tu peux pas <u>mess around</u> avec la troupe [16]	You can't <u>mess around</u> with the troupe [chart rank #57, French-dominant]

Figure 3: Excerpts and translations of French-dominant Franglais in FouKi's charting songs.
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Interestingly, the expression "Check-moi flex" [15] from the first line constitutes a reinterpreted idiom, as seen in my earlier analysis. FouKi's reinterpretation plays upon standard French pronoun inversion, usually seen in imperative and interrogative forms, extending it to reflect the possessive form of the original English. The creativity continues in the second and third lines, in which FouKi inserts compound English slang borrowings within French sentences. One compound slang borrowing, "cool kids" [15], constitutes a noun phrase while the other, "mess around" [16], is a verb phrase. On the mainland French rap charts, I hardly observed compound borrowings, with not a single compound verb phrase outside of complete code-switching. This screams that even the simplest acts of lexical borrowing may take on more advanced forms in the context of French-speaking Canada, where English and French language cultures overlap more strongly.

At other moments in his rap performance, FouKi constructs Franglais from an English basis, inserting French noun phrases or dependent clauses that respect high-level English syntax. These three examples from the same songs demonstrate variety even within this category.

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She used to be <u>ma copilote</u> [15]	She used to be <u>my copilot</u> [chart rank #41, English-dominant]
Watch out <u>quand le beat il joue</u> [16]	Watch out <u>when the beat plays</u> [chart rank #57, English-dominant]
Good times <u>que nous accumulons</u> [16]	Good times <u>that we accumulate</u> [chart rank #57, English-dominant]

Figure 4: Excerpts and translations of English-dominant Franglais in FouKi's charting songs.
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Recall that "Bijou" produces a fivefold increase in English-dominant Franglais over "Copilote." It is also the song with more adventurous French embedding, containing multiple examples of French dependent clauses in English sentences. The fact that French can serve as a subordinate language to English in these Canadian rap lyrics brilliantly illustrates the crux of the resistance discourse: challenging French linguistic purism by modulating the dynamics of borrowing.

Social Significance: English Borrowing as a Creative Resistance Practice

Clearly, a highly creative and dynamic practice has emerged around English borrowings in French rap, both in mainland France and in Canada. However, it is exactly the kind of practice that gets rappers denied $18,000 grants and prevents their music from being played on French radio stations. These examples reflect the linguistically prescriptive pressures that the dominant culture in these genre spheres exerts upon French rappers. Despite these pressures, rappers modulate the default, standardized French, taking influences from street slang and foreign languages via deliberate, culturally aware choices. I argue that English language borrowings constitute a significant part of this emergent resistance discourse by which rappers challenge narratives of linguistic purism and, in doing so, construct translinguistic identities.

Post-colonial studies scholar Lara Dotson-Renta captures the exigence fueling the genre: "French hip-hop frequently contests and examines the contours and parameters of a national French identity, proposing that not everyone within France shares the same relationship to the historical legacies and events upon which French national ideals were built" [17, p. 354]. Since standard language is inexorably bound to historical legacy, French rappers convey their distance from that legacy when they defy standardizations. At the same time, every act of borrowing or slang construction communicates a relationship with an alternate language culture, reclaiming power by platforming marginalized communities such as those within *les banlieues*.
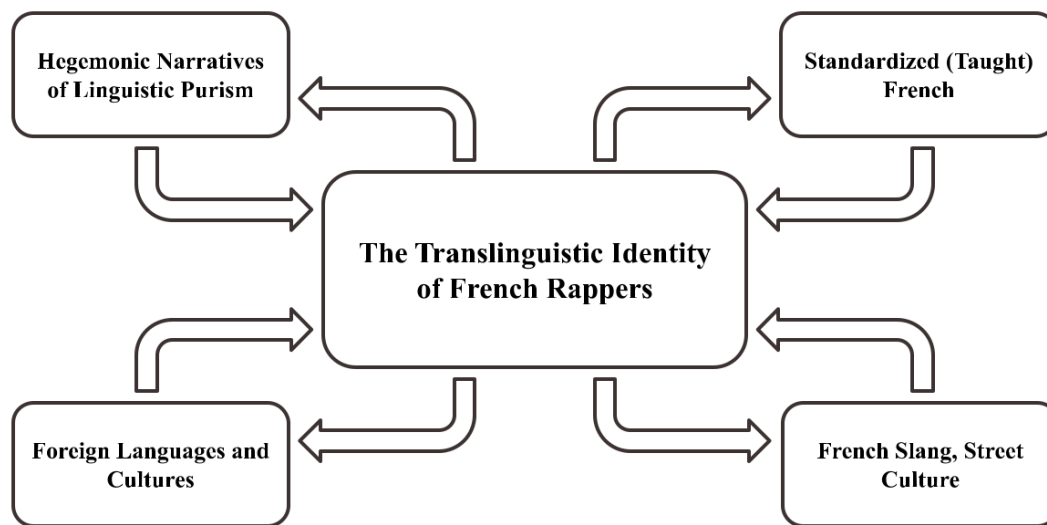

Figure 5: Mapping the sociolinguistic forces at play in the identity formation of French rappers.

Conclusion: Why It Matters to Empower This Non-standard Language Use
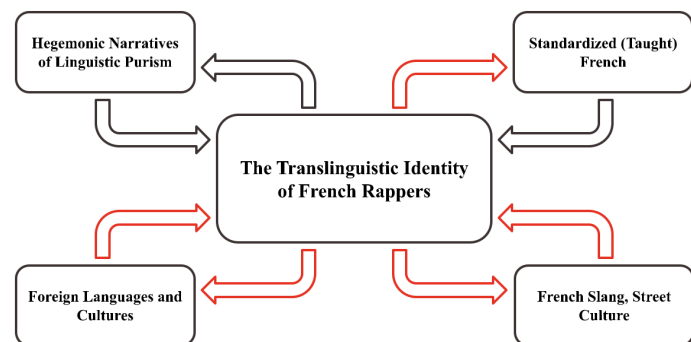

Figure 6: Sociolinguistic negotiation processes threatened by institutional linguistic purism.

As linguistic prescriptivism prevails, many aspects of how French rappers construct and affirm their identities hang in the balance. Within their commercialized genre, these rappers must negotiate the wavering dynamics of the music industry, in which narratives from the dominant culture define mass marketability. Additionally, linguistic purism serves to cut off the practice of language change as it emerges from French rap music, marginalizing the generations who adopt its language practices. Prohibiting these foreign and domestic influences into French which more accurately reflect the cultures of interlocutors can only further dysphoria within French identity. This act exacerbates preexisting oppression, and it forcefully limits the dimensions of creative expression within a language so admired for that very artfulness. Within their societies that deplatform emerging language practices and paint them as deviant, French rappers emerge as defenders of an inclusive future for their communities. I urge readers to recognize their dynamic music genre

for what it truly is: art for a complex, diverse French language diaspora, not a stain upon some contrived linguistic heritage.

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