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*Variétés et diffusion du français dans  
l'espace francophone à travers la  
chanson*

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## FROM SOUND TO MUSIC: VOICES FROM OLD PARIS

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In 19<sup>th</sup> century Paris thrived a dialect, spoken by the working classes, and originally associated with thieves and criminals, which was later popularised by the literature, the popular music, and the films of the 1930s. The terminology lexicographers used to describe this Parisian vernacular as particularly brutal: a crook's roguish tongue, an evil, low, and vicious language. Anything uttered in the popular tongue was immediately discriminatorily associated with promiscuity, brashness, vulgarity and ignorance. Yet these stigmatised linguistic modes fascinated spectators and analysts so much that they inspired stereotypical portrayals in literature and on the stage, and were reproduced in cabarets and on the silver screen. The *rapprochement* of the social classes during the Second World War brought about the slow disappearance of the sociolect, and a part of its lexicon was dispersed among all social groups. Our aim, which is to recreate the Parisian vernacular of the 1930s, is of sociological and scientific interest. With the help of a few rare recordings of the shouts of truly smooth-tongued Parisian market vendors available at the Bibliothèque nationale de Paris, and 1930s songs and films, this study aims to piece together the various parts of the puzzle and create a picture of the salient features of what was generally and pejoratively known, until the late 1960s, as 'Popular French'. The term 'Popular French' is not only discriminatory, but appears to imply that there was only one popular way of speaking. Yet, Paris's streets resounded with more than a dozen ways of speaking in the twentieth century, and not with just one indiscriminate collection of voices. In this article we shall examine vocalisations in all their forms, as unique and allusive enunciations of reality, sometimes material, sometimes poetic. As we shall see, the voices of street vendors, popular singers, and pre-war cinema stars often oscillate between speech and song.

With the exception of some of Paul Passy's works (1891, 1917), which offer a variety of phonological information, Nisard (1872), Bauche (1925), Frei (1925) and Guiraud's (1965) latest works are the most informative references when investigating the existence of a Parisian vernacular, since but a few snippets of raw data in the form of sound files remain. Apart from the songs of Aristide Bruant, Fréhel, Maurice Chevalier and other *comiques troupiers* or 'coarse comedians' recorded between the 1920s and 1940s, and the films of the 1930s – which shall be discussed in more detail later, and which often offer a stereotypical portrait of the speech of the working classes – the Bibliothèque Nationale de France's (BNF or French National Library) archives contain a few audiovisual files of interviews with Parisians and recordings of market vendors, which were carried out in the Phonotèque Nationale's studios and date back to as early as 1912.

The corpus of Parisian speech that we have put together, comprising the previously mentioned songs and films, only provides us with a stereotypical view of the Parisian vernacular. It is often artificial, and should be analysed with caution. Non-standard terms abound, and frequently contribute to the creation of comic effects. The vendor's calls are made of a leitmotif of superfluous expressions and are primarily intended to ensnare the customer. Unlike the stylised, artificial language of the recordings that were 'written to be heard or even proclaimed', these sound files are far from fictitious. They give us an idea of the non-standard linguistic terms that authors, directors, screenwriters, actors and singers considered to be typical of the Parisian vernacular. Though they may not always be representative of a linguistic reality, these little-studied recordings are nevertheless an important source of information given the scarcity of the recorded evidence that remains.

## Early recordings of Paris

In 'Essay on a history of voices in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century' the historian Arlette Farge (2009) has turned her attention to the voices of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. With the voices of the street she has sought to capture the background noise, music and dialect, from royal decrees and police archives where statements taken from prisoners were filed. Archives abound with treasure for historians and linguists. It is somewhat of an oddity, but traces of French popular slang may even be found in some poems by Victor Hugo, for example 'The last day of a condemned man', the 1829 poem recently put to music.

*C'est dans la rue du Mail  
Où j'ai été coltigé  
Maluré  
Par trois coquins de railles,  
Lirlonfa malurette,  
Sur mes sique' ont foncé  
Lirlonfa maluré.*

Victor Hugo drew on different sources: 'The trial of the coquillards' from 1455, Oudot's 'Jargon ou le langage de l'argot réformé' (1649), 'The history and trial of Cartouche' (1722) and 'The memoirs of Vidocq' (1828) (Vidocq, 2006). Nevertheless, the subject of this article remains that of contemporary recording.

Among the oldest remaining files in the BNF is a 1891 recording of Gustave Eiffel reciting the poem 'L'Acacia'<sup>1</sup>, written by his friend the novelist Jean Rameau, at a social gathering in his apartment on the 3<sup>rd</sup> floor of the Tower, and a reading of 'Pont Mirabeau'<sup>2</sup> by Guillaume Apollinaire. Unfortunately only a few examples of typically Parisian characteristics can be gleaned from such recordings.

The other archive materials are equally frugal in their offerings, when the examination of the few remaining recordings of the actress Sarah Bernhardt is taken into account. The artificial diction, teetering on preciosity, which yesteryear constituted all the piece's charm, today seems affected and theatrical in the manner of the great tragic actresses of the past. Nick-named 'the golden voice', she would make several appearances on the silver screen, but one might reasonably suppose that she would not have had a lengthy career whilst her style remained so. Today her seemingly grandiloquent, affected diction and over-the-top gestures appear to be more akin to performances in the theatre or even in silent films, than to a cinema that was developing the use of sound, later to rely upon dialogue.

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1 'The Acacia Tree'.

2 'Mirabeau Bridge'.

The recordings of vendors' calls analysed in this article were carried out in the 'Archives de la Parole', under the direction of the linguist Ferdinand Brunot, who founded the facility in 1911 and became its first director. They feature the voices of authentic speakers of the popular Parisian tongue, and authentic street vendors.

The call, half way between speech and song, is not only a method of communication by which an individual blends into the crowd, but by which he or she advertises his or her affiliation to a certain social group. Market traders' calls can be spontaneous, but more often than not are structured and organised. They are subject to precise verbal regulations and are designed to attract the public's attention, and use words to weave a web of communication and facilitate an exchange that is most commonly commercial in nature. With regard to the call's function as a sociolinguistic platform, it projects the identity of the individual who utters it, as well as that of the class to which he/she belongs.

It is true that first documented calls date back to the poetry of the Middle Ages, but it was later that they were to become the 'literary creations', with numerous vulgar variations, of the 'Bibliothèque bleue' or 'Pedlar's Library'<sup>3</sup>. In the first half of the 19<sup>th</sup> century many street vendors' jobs became defunct and the coarse language of the traders in Les Halles, popularised by literature, was almost entirely lost (Lodge, 2004: 216). Open-air selling did not die out however, and the call lived on in markets and other public places until the end of the century. Anecdotal evidence in the recordings reveals that there was once a 'calls' school by the Bastille, where pedlars could learn their trade. Each different profession had its own call, passed down by traders from generation to generation, and the use of another man's call was an offence punishable by law. The voices in the recordings stored at the BNF recreate these calls for us. Thanks to such recordings we can hear the call of the pimperl seller, 'pour les p'tits oiseaux'<sup>4</sup>, and also the clothing, potato, bushel vendors, and skate vendors selling skate 'toute en vie'<sup>5</sup>, of whiting<sup>6</sup> and 'qui glacent'<sup>7</sup> herring.

The caller speaks in a socially marked vernacular, of varying lexis, the register of which is often poeticised. The pronoun 'vous' is frequently used to initiate dialogue, and allows the caller to speak directly to his customers in the polite form, but derivations of the first person singular are equally ubiquitous. Collective first person plural pronouns such as 'nous'<sup>8</sup> and 'on'<sup>9</sup> also abound. These pronouns are keywords which resurface over and over again in the street vendor's repertoire. The repeated lexemes are associated to market selling and foodstuff ('seller', 'call', 'Paris', 'pears', 'sir', 'clothes', 'cherries', 'street', 'china', 'chairs', etc.) . A few simple, complimentary adjectives are used to describe foodstuffs ('sweet', 'beautiful', 'good'), and are reinforced by the emphatic use of adverbs ('well', 'often/lots', 'very'). The theme of currency is also common ('sous'<sup>10</sup>, 'francs') and completes the linguistic exchange. Negations ('never', 'little' 'no/any more'), used to highlight the positive qualities of the goods on sale, are also common.

Calls are not a specialised language however, but boast the product's qualities through the repetition of simple adjectives. The tone is bawdy and burlesque, and the lexicon is relatively basic. Its rhymes are simplistic and the repeated lexical items serve a similar function to mnemonics.

In order to compare the older calls in our possession with current market vendor calls, in 2005 we made some recordings in Les Halles (a shopping district in central Paris) and in

<sup>3</sup> Popular fiction printed on blue pages, sold by pedlars.

<sup>4</sup> 'for the littl' birds'.

<sup>5</sup> 'that's still wriggling'.

<sup>6</sup> 'for frying'.

<sup>7</sup> 'ice cold'.

<sup>8</sup> Standard 'we'.

<sup>9</sup> Informal way of saying 'we'.

<sup>10</sup> An informal term for the French unit of currency, similar to the British word 'quid'.

working class areas. It was in the iconic working class area of Ménilmontant, walking down the Boulevard de Belleville, that we found the most interesting calls. The calls used to attract customers are intended to be humorous, and employ a simple, improvised rhyme that features a kind of assonance, but which are not at all laden with social associations: ‘Et la fraise, et la fraise... mesdemoiselles arrêtez-vous, il y a des fraises presque aussi belles que les demoiselles’<sup>11</sup>; ‘Voilà la fraise, voilà la framboise, oh la la...’<sup>12</sup>.

## Popular music and cinema

The very first popular songs of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, rare surviving treasures by Aristide Bruant, Mayol or Milton, available on CD and the internet, are the oldest remaining sound recordings that testify to the existence of a Parisian vernacular. While the 1930s ‘melodramatic’ cabaret songs made a name for singers that were once called ‘chanteuses-réalistes’ such as Marie Dubas, Damia and Fréhel, the *comiques-troupiers* or ‘coarse comedians’ came to be classified as farcical and grotesque. One such comedian, by the name of Maurice Chevalier, born in Ménilmontant, very quickly made a name for himself. A gifted impersonator and natural comic, he fast became an embodiment of the archetypal working class Parisian. Chevalier’s songs, like those of his contemporary Trénet, were always centered upon Paris, music, love, and *joie de vivre*, as well as street culture (Barbérís: 2008, 50). The popular speech they employed was often artificial and contrived, and used tongue-twisters, puns, and non-standard vocabulary repeatedly for comic effect; ultimately proving themselves to be exercises in style and diction, like the songs of Gaston Ouvrard (Abecassis: 2005). The various linguistic signals (body movements, verbal tics, complicit laughter, etc.) used by the performer to facilitate interaction with his public were a key part of the artistic recreation of popular speech.

As Chion has rightly shown, taking as an example the many voices that silent film audiences imagined Garbo to have, actors in silent films are essentially imagined, harmonised voices. With the introduction of dialogue to cinema these voices became their speaker’s only reality (1999: 8), even if the same actor changes his tone of voice, or takes on a different accent or tone of voice when singing for example. Furthermore, before featuring speech the cinema featured only songs, and it is as if it were songs that smoothed the transition between silence and speech. As the cinema was finding its feet in the early days of its transition away from silence, films repeatedly alternated musical breaks and interludes with silence. ‘The Jazz Singer’ (1927) for example, widely considered to be the first spoken-word film, dedicates more screen time to song than speech. After forty minutes of silence the protagonist expresses himself for the first time, in a transitory, hybrid mode of expression between speech and song: a form of speech-song. The French actors who played an active part in the transition from silence to speech were often cabaret singers favoured primarily for their body movements and facial expressions (such as Fernandel or Michel Simon), but also for the quality of their vocal and musical performances. The 1930s saw the advent of various comic performances punctuated with songs that contrasted the lower levels of society with the upper middle classes, such as when Michel Simon, Arletty and Arletty burst into song in Jean Boyer’s colourful piece *Circonstances atténuantes*. A fascination for this harmonised version of the Parisian vernacular and the argot spoken by the small-time Parisian mafia would subsequently develop. The American singer Josephine Barker would also have her moment of glory on the silver screen, in films that prioritised dance and musical numbers over complex plot lines.

<sup>11</sup> ‘Strawberries, strawberries, ladies stop why don’t you, we’ve got strawberries almost as pretty as you’.

<sup>12</sup> ‘Oh strawberries, oh raspberries, oh la la’.

As Gadet and Conein (1998) pointed out, accents ‘produce an immediate sense of difference’, and 1930s French cinema did not shy away from this effect. On the contrary, its melodious or ‘exotic’ nature was capitalised upon for comic effect. Initially films were made that created a harmonised ‘regional’ impression, whether of the diatopic or diastratic variety; the latter illustrated by the contrast Marcel Pagnol draws between Marius, César and Fanny’s Marseillais accent, and the Lyonnais accent of Monsieur Brun; the former relating to those who chose to participate in the classed-based characterisation of poetic realism in the 1930s. Arletty and Dorville’s popular accents in *Circonstances Atténuantes*, associated with working-class Parisians, and the Northern French accent of the aristocrat Marcel Dalio in *La Règle du jeu*, underline the dichotomy between working class and upper middle class accents. Working class Parisian actors, *comiques troupiers* and music hall singers were the performers most commonly called upon to play Parisian thugs. The unforgettable Jean Gabin had a slight suburban twang (evident in the elongation of penultimate syllables), but only when he played certain Parisian characters. The Parisian proletariat’s accent (with two clearly distinguishable pronunciations of A, open Es, rolled Rs and elongated first or middle syllables) could be found in performances by the singer Albert Préjeant in René Clair’s *Sous les troits de Paris* (1930) and Henri Garat in *Un mauvais garçon* (1936). Jules Berry, originally from Poitiers, spoke with a standard accent. Michel Simon, a Swiss national, spoke with both a Geneva and popular Parisian accent. Fernandel however, who was originally from Marseilles but had many faces and voices, could speak with a regional accent or the standard accent of a well-educated member of the bourgeoisie with equal flair. Aside from the typical Parisian accent, other phonological traits such as the suppression of schwas (saying ‘j’connais’ rather than ‘je connais’), elisions (‘t’as d’beaux yeux t’sais’ rather than ‘tu as des beaux yeux, tu sais’<sup>13</sup>) omitted syllables (‘vlà’ rather than ‘voilà’) and the amalgamation of words (using the ‘z’ sound to join words: ‘donnez-moi z’en’ rather than ‘donnez-m’en’, ‘des zharicots’ rather than ‘des haricots’ and ‘jusqu’à zhier’ rather than ‘jusqu’à hier’) also dominated popular films. The orthography used in transcriptions of songs and scenes from films facilitates the reproduction of the phonological traits of non-standard terms, but as Barbéris has shown, such an orthography stigmatises the language it records, as it ‘presents the silent phonemes as deficiencies and faults in comparison to a standardised rule’ (2008: 67, our translation). The French pronunciation of Anglophone place names such as ‘Liverpoole’ and ‘New Yorke’ is used much more frequently in French songs. The chorus ‘Ma pomme c’est moi’<sup>14</sup>, is sung in a typically popular Parisian way, with a long, open ‘o’ and a tremolo on the ‘mwe’ of ‘moi’, by Maurice Chevalier. The ‘r’ sound in popular songs sung by artists such as Georgius and Maurice Chevalier is a rolled, archaic ‘r’ associated with the stage and operettas, and was a tradition and not a working-class phenomenon, as Fernand Carton argues (Personal Communication: 2009). With relation to 1930s pronunciation, it is interesting to note that in the film *La Grande illusion* (1937), Maréchal, played by Gabin, says that he is ‘Parisian’ with a precisely pronounced ‘R’. Yet at the beginning of the film, when he says *Frou frou* whilst listening to a record, his ‘r’s are quite clearly rolled (*Ibid.*).

From a syntactic point of view, the word ‘on’ is repeated excessively, as well as interrogations such as ‘est-ce-que’ (‘ce que c’est que’ for example). The all-purpose pronoun ‘que’ replaces all other relative pronouns ‘le mec que j’ai fait la connaissance’<sup>15</sup>, ‘quant elle rit, c’est moi que je souris’<sup>16</sup> (Ouvrard in *La Caissière du grand café*).

Lexical trends are often the greatest indicators when it comes to the Parisian vernacular. As Gadet demonstrated, lexicon is “a key feature, to the point that it has been an essential

<sup>13</sup> ‘Ya got pretty’eyes ya know’.

<sup>14</sup> ‘I am my apple’.

<sup>15</sup> ‘The bloke what I met’.

<sup>16</sup> ‘When she laughs it’s me what smiles’.

contributor to many Francophones' understanding of the term, 'popular French'" (2002: 4, our translation). The calls, films and songs of the 1930s and 1940s are vestiges of Parisian vernacular which are characterised by the abundance of non-standard expressions; idiomatic phrases that often seem a little coarse; a crypto-ludic usage of argot, often borrowed from nineteenth century thieves' slang and their illegal exploits; and numerous curses, typically saturated by key words, interjections and spontaneous exclamations.

Though the stereotypical portrait painted by these recordings is not an entirely accurate likeness of what Parisian vernacular might have been, it reveals the salient features of popular speech and how important they were to the collective conscience of the time. It is true that the documents selected are imperfect in that they quantitatively overexaggerate certain traits (Lodge (2004) calls this effect 'concentration'). Yet since more authentic sound files of the Parisian vernacular do not exist, linguists must recreate its characteristics using such calls, songs and films alone.

21<sup>st</sup> century Paris shares very few similarities with the Paris of the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. The sound of travelling salesmen's and workers' voices that once rang out in the streets of Paris have disappeared. There is now not as much distinction between the social classes as in the 1930s, when the bourgeoisie were very much separated from the working classes. The intermingling of cultures has created a true melting pot, in which the Parisian vernacular accent is hardly ever heard, except very rarely, on some elderly people's lips (François-Geiger, 1991:6). It is usually only market vendors from South East Asia that use the call to address their customers, and Parisians nowadays hardly ever use such a method to attract customers. Calls can still be heard on the Parisian metro, where street preachers from a plethora of diverse backgrounds, often former Parisian intellectuals, eloquently rail against their misfortune. Though Parisian vernacular is hardly ever heard at the market, it has been dispersed, pieced together into a new form, devoid of its diastratic connotations, around all Paris's *arrondissements*, particularly in the voices of certain RATP employees, postal workers, CGT members, and various other workers such as bistrot and café owners, waiters, plumbers, gasmen, carpenters, taxi drivers, and butchers.

The phonetitian Francis Carton found a few faint traces of the suburban accent in the 1980s, and includes a sample of his findings in his *Accents des Français*. Yet if the 'pure' Parisian vernacular in the strict sense ever existed in a consistent fashion at all, it has been mixed with phonetisms of diverse origins since the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. It seems that French 1930s cinema exaggerated Parisian vernacular's most noticeable traits, in Carette's inimitable drawl, or in the lengthening of penultimate syllables, immortalised by the sentence/chorus spoken by Arletty in the film *Hôtel du Nord* 'atmosphère, atmosphère', with an /a/ pronounced like an [æ]<sup>17</sup>. Such antiquated pronunciations would be cemented into the popular conscience in the 1960s, by Audiard's 'fabricated' dialogues. But aside from being unique as a genre, do Audiard's texts recreate the Parisian vernacular of the past?

It would be interesting to investigate the Parisian vernacular tongue in a more systematic way in the future. A comparative study of the latest songs and films and those from the 1930s might also demonstrate the evolution of Parisian French, and could allow us to substantiate our theories on the linguistic traits we have underlined. In order to better understand Paris's sociolinguistic landscape and social and linguistic developments it would be necessary to research into market vendors' calls on a larger scale, and extend the search area into Paris and its suburbs, where the vernacular tongue spoken by today's youths is in constant evolution.

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<sup>17</sup> Barbéris argues that there is a link between this pronunciation of the 'a' sound and a phenomenon of 'hyper-correction' that began amongst the Parisian bourgeoisie but later trickled down to even the lowest of the social classes, 'from top to bottom' (2008: 69, our translation)

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