Accented French in films: Performing and evaluating in-group stylisations

GAËLLE PLANCHENAUULT

Abstract

By comparing two recent French films, *L’Esquive* (Kechiche 2004) and *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* (Boon 2008), a realistic drama and a comedy, this article proposes an analysis of two different cases of stylisation that entertain complex relations of authenticity with stigmatised vernaculars, and in which actors stylise their own linguistic community. Discussing cinematic perception of non-standard varieties and the way spectators read into characterisation’s techniques, it shows that awareness of any deviation from the norm is heightened by the media and taken as meaningful to the drama at play. Finally, it is argued that an ideological shift takes place during the reception of the films and that second-order indexicality is interpreted as first-order indexicality.

Keywords: standard language ideology, stylisation, accent, French films

1. Introduction

In the 2000s, the French audience saw, within the space of a few years, the release of two movies that made heavy use of accented French: *L’Esquive* (‘Games of love and chance’, 2004) and *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* (‘Welcome to the sticks’, 2008). Both were to become major successes: a critical success in the case of the first one (4 Césars won in 2005), a phenomenally popular hit for the second one (with 20.2 million viewers, it is the most successful film in France since the Second World War). Both films are very verbal and place language in a prominent position: not merely as a dramatic device but at the core of a reflection on the place and legitimacy of French non-standard varieties. The two movies were taken to be accurate linguistic depictions, as in both cases the directors, as well as the actors, are members of the communities they portray. But both films propose an ambivalent linguistic display as
dialogues are used at one moment to alienate the audience (the characters are unintelligible) and at another to endear characters to the spectators, or at least to provoke one’s sympathy for what is shown as the expression of a community’s identity. But apart from those similarities, there is a major difference between the two films: one is a comedy, the other one a realistic drama. The question that this difference of genre entails concerns stylisation. Stylistic language is produced by means of performances in which ‘presenters make it clear to their audience that the images they manufacture … are “put on”, “for now”, and “for show”’ (Coupland 2001: 347). It entails a display of others’ voices in the production of “as if” utterance[s]’ (Coupland & Jaworski 2004: 35). Exercises of stylisation are obvious in the case of comedies, which often border on caricature and where the very act of putting on a voice is comical. However, can the term be used to define the performance of non-professional actors who present themselves as equal to the characters they play? Should one rather be talking in this case of a realistic performance that aims at having the audience forget that it is a mere copy of the original? It is true to say that, from the audience’s point of view, a major difference in the perception of the two films lies in the degree of veracity that is ascribed to the dialogues. For example, *L’Esquive* was often used as a primary source of *banlieue* slang: in the absence of authentic documents, scholars rely on such fiction films to display realistic linguistic behaviours and analyse speech characteristics. However, **playing oneself** is certainly different from **being oneself**, and one should consider to what extent non-professional actors reproduce expected performances of themselves as the Others.

This article is organised as follows: I first provide a brief theoretical overview of ideologies related to standard language, French non-standard varieties and accents. I then present a contextualisation of the linguistic discourses framing the films studied. By comparing the supposedly true-to-life display of French urban vernacular in *L’Esquive* with dialectal stylisations (also called hyperpicard) in *Bienvenue chez les ch’tis*, I discuss whether the actors’ performances in the former film are cases of stylisation. However, this study is neither an exhaustive analysis of the cinematic texts nor a comparison of the dialogues with what the vernaculars are like in the real world, but it rather examines the directors’ linguistic choices. Thirdly, I discuss the theoretical implications of the concept of realism in films and argue that, notwithstanding the genre, a film can only display linguistic stylisation. Finally, I discuss the ways in which the viewers’ commentaries on the two films, *L’Esquive* (Kechiche 2004) and *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* (Boon 2008), bear evidence of a significant shift from second-order indexicality to first-order indexicality.
2. Standard language ideology, accents and orders of indexicality

‘Standard Language Ideology’ (coined by Milroy & Milroy 1985) is the backdrop for this article. It was defined by Lippi-Green (1994: 166–167) as ‘a bias toward an abstracted, idealized, homogeneous spoken language which is imposed from above’. In France, the media have played an important part in its legitimisation. In films, the choice of spoken varieties and the way they are performed entail complex implications that guide audiences’ perceptions of the characters. Regarding the common perception of the French standard, Lodge (1993) argues that the French have a strong tradition of linguistic prescriptivism. He says that ‘[the average layperson in France] is sensitive to the most subtle distinctions among the particular “accents” and styles he or she encounters ... It is quite usual for French-speaking laypersons to regard slang or regional forms as not being French at all: “Ce n’est pas du français ça, c’est de l’argot”’ (1993: 4). I acknowledge that to refer to cinematic displays of non-standard varieties as ‘accented French’, as I do in this article, is ideologically loaded: it alludes to the fact that the stylized performances are embedded in a sociolinguistic context. Comparing Bienvenue chez les ch’tis and L’Esquive, I found that both films bring into focus non-standard varieties whose status as French language has been commonly put into question: the first because it is seen as extremely low culture, the second, because of its hybrid form. Regarding popular perception of accents, Lippi-Green (1994: 165) explains that ‘for most people, accent is a dustbin category: it includes all the technical meanings, and a more general and subjective one: accent is how the other speaks’. For Yaguello (1988: 32), ‘the word accent is usually understood as a deviation from a norm, which is an absence ([hence the expression] “to speak without an accent”’). And finally, Fagyal, in her monograph on ‘accents de banlieue’ (‘suburban accents’), argues that ‘every perceived accent is a social construction of the Other, and often an identity that is imposed on the Other’ (2010: 15, my translation). For film audiences, accented forms are marked. Depending on the speaker, addressee and spectator, accented French indexes a macro-context (a community to which the speaker belongs or of which he originates, this community being geographical or social) or a micro-context (in the case of stylistic variation as speakers may tend to accommodate or even drop their accent in formal situations). Furthermore, in France, stereotypical views have long linked strong accents to lower classes or rural origins (Boughton 2006), which the media have played a large part in sustaining. On the back cover of her aforementioned book, Fagyal (2010) notes that banlieue accent is a real stereotype of Contemporary French: ‘it is recognised, imitated and makes the headlines’.
Androutsopoulos (2010: 182) calls such social practice ‘ideologizing’, a term that he defines as follows: ‘Ideologizing refers to the process by which ways of using language become socially recognized, classified, evaluated, debated – in short invested with language ideologies’ (Androutsopoulos 2010: 182). The gerund emphasizes the activity of ongoing processes in which language ideologies are ‘constantly produced, reproduced, circulated in a variety of discursive arenas, including (but not restricted to) mediated public discourses’ (Androutsopoulos 2010: 184). These processes are co-constructed by media and audiences and the meanings that are given to the ‘ways of using language’ are negotiated according to interfaces (media to media – in the case of film reviews; or media to audience – when the film is received by heterogeneous audiences) or to the circularity of these processes (audience to media to audience – in the case of spectators interviewed for a newspaper article; or media to audience to media – for spectators comments posted on blogs).

In order to contextualize the linguistic representations proposed in films, it is necessary to analyse the way directors’ language ideologies interact with dominant discourses – in other words, whether they endorse them or oppose them. Moreover, a study of the perception of the end result is needed: Are spectators aware of the directors’ intentions to reframe language attitudes? Do preconceived linguistic beliefs influence their interpretation of the film? In the latter case, I argue that most often a flattening of indexical orders is taking place. With regard to Silverstein’s concept of orders of indexicality, Woolard (2008: 437) points out the following:

Language users everywhere tend to associate particular linguistic forms with specific kinds of speaker or contexts of speaking … In Silverstein’s system, which builds on Peirce’s work, first-order indexicality is the pre-ideological but still semiotic work of forming these associations. … If first-order indexicality involves a semiotic act of noticing, second-order indexicality brings ideology to bear on the relationship noticed. (Woolard 2008: 437)

Taking L’Esquive as an example, choices of words and accents are not intended to solely index a social background, but they also index a specific ideological framework. Furthermore, by having the same actors switch between youthspeak and Marivaux’s 18th century French, Kechiche’s goal is to show that speaking in a voice is a performance. Second-order indexicality is to be found in the filmic discourse that frames the dialogues, and I will show that in both films the directors are well aware of the current ideologies regarding non-standard varieties and aim at
changing common stereotypical views by reframing them. However, is this second-order indexicality perceived as such by film viewers?

Before going any further into the analysis of the films’ discursive flows, a presentation of the languages ideologies displayed by *L’Esquive* and *Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis* is necessary as their linguistic standpoints are complex. Assuming the aims of both films were to reframe discourses on non-standard varieties, they appear to exploit, nonetheless, standard language ideology and the underlying assumptions on which it is built, especially those that separate deviations from the norm.

3. Contexts of linguistic ideologies framing the films

Abdellatif Kechiche shot *L’Esquive* (‘Games of love and chance’, 2004) on location in one of the Courneuve council estates, a notorious Parisian suburb situated in Seine-Saint-Denis, one of the poorest French departments, crippled by social inequalities. *L’Esquive* tells the story of a group of ethnically diverse, economically disadvantaged high school students and friends, and the difficulties they encounter in their project to stage Marivaux’s 18th century classical play, *Le jeu de l’amour et du hasard* (‘The game of love and chance’). The characters are constantly engaged in verbal encounters, making a highly talkative film that alternates between scenes of interaction among the young people who, like any teenagers, joke, court and argue — ‘continually jockeying for position in a youth culture clearly dominated by *their very striking sociolect*’ (Strand 2009: 262 — my emphasis), and scenes where they rehearse for the play. In doing so, the film juxtaposes two varieties which are usually situated at the two extremes of the French varieties continuum: ‘Marivaux’s hyper-legitimized French [and] a suburban back-slang spoken by the adolescents’ (Swamy 2007: 60). The French audience is well acquainted with these two varieties of French as, in the French linguistic imaginary (Houdebine-Gravaud 2002), they embody diametrically opposite stances on language. Regarding the first, the common use of the periphrasis ‘la langue de Molière’ or ‘la langue de Racine’ to refer to the French language shows that the latter is described with pride as the creation (or possession) of the most celebrated French writers. As for *verlan, français des cités* or *parler banlieue*, as the youth speak is usually named, it has been highly mediatised, with three different sorts of coverage: at turns it is depicted as inventive, buzzing and excitingly counter-cultural; at other times, it is denounced as a symbol of linguistic and social impoverishment, not to say the cause of a ‘linguistic ghettoisation’ (see Bentolila’s controversy’); and finally, more recently, it has been described as a multi-ethnic (mainly influenced by the *Beur* population’s Arabic language) youth speak (Boyer 2001).
By using a ‘fiery mélange of back-slang and high classical French’ (Swamy 2007: 60) and having the two coexist with equal dramatic importance, Kechiche aims at giving some legitimacy to the youth language that he sees as beautiful and enriched by its diverse origins (in Fajardo 2004); creative, intelligent and harmonious (in Melinard 2004); in short, as cultured as Marivaux’s language. Moreover, by having the characters switch with ease from one to the other, Kechiche undermines the determinist position that directly links ways of speaking to one’s identity or social condition (the latter associated with the view that the teenagers are victims of a linguistic confinement), and implies, in Goffman’s style, that speaking a language – any language – is a performance. Moreover, one should not neglect to note that Marivaux’s text also proposes an exercise of stylisation as the characters of the play swap positions and do an impression of their companion.² For the actors who play the parts, it means performing a performance. And there is much irony in the fact that Krimo, the young hero from the Parisian suburb, is asked to play the role of a valet who pretends to be an aristocrat.

The two extremes of the dialectal continuum are not the only forms of French spoken in the film. The varieties and the characters who speak them can be categorised as follows:

- *Parler banlieue*: the teenagers
- Marivaux’s written-literary text (spoken during rehearsals and in the final performance of the play): the high school students and their teacher
- Standard French: the parents, the teacher of French, the police

The only characters that code-switch between the three are the Courneauve teenagers. Interestingly enough, in the film, suburban slang and Marivaux’s 18th century French coexist peacefully. It is with Standard French that the youth vernacular comes into conflict. On this point, I would like to highlight the fact that, in the film, most speakers of the dominant variety are different embodiments of authority: parental, academic and coercive. Of course, the choice of Marivaux’s play has political implications. *Le jeu de l’amour et du hasard* is a story of social determinism, as emphasised, in Kechiche’s film, by the teacher’s interpretation of the play:

We are completely prisoners of our social condition. When one is rich for 20 years or poor for 20 years, one can always dress up in rags if one is rich, in designer clothes if one is poor, but we cannot get rid of a certain language, a certain type of conversation, a particular form of expression, the way we behave, all of which indicate where we come
from. And moreover, it [the play] is called *Games of Love and Chance*, but it shows us that there is no chance involved.

(trans. by Swamy 2007: 62)

The teacher’s comment refers to a linguistic stigma. It implies that one may try to speak like someone one is not (usually above one’s condition); one will never fool one’s interlocutor into believing one is from a different social background. In other words, according to this view, one cannot change language or perform another variety. If this is very much in line with Bourdieu & Passeron’s (1990) view of schools as the institutionalised rationalisation of social inequalities, it seems to be in complete contradiction with the republican Education Nationale’s mission, as expressed in another scene of the film when, irritated by Krimo’s silence and incapacity to play the scene, the teacher loses her temper and bursts out: *Sors de toi! amuse-toi! libère-toi!* (‘Come out of yourself! Enjoy yourself! Free yourself!’). In this scene, what is implied is that in order to free oneself of a social stigma and to fit into French society, these teenagers will have to adopt the dominant variety: standard French. In what appears to be a scene of symbolic violence, Krimo is being told to take pleasure in being someone else, in a schizophrenic use of the Other’s language. To go back to Bourdieu’s words:

What circulates on the linguistic market is not ‘language’ as such, but rather discourses that are stylistically marked, both in their production, insofar as each speaker fashions an idiolect from the common language, and in their reception, insofar as each recipient helps to produce the message which he perceives and appreciates by bringing to it everything that makes up his singular and collective experience.

(Bourdieu 1992: 39)

With respect to cinema, the recipient’s participation is surely the case of any film spectator who brings into the theatre personal views of the world as well as his/her own interpretative strategies. However, I would like to argue that linguistic production and perception take place within a restricted set of possibilities. For example, interpretative schemata have been formed by one’s social experience of movie-going, an experience that takes place within a specific society that shares a limited set of values and linguistic ideologies. Moreover, this experience is inscribed in a discursive framework.

If Kechiche’s film had to be categorised in a genre, it would be ‘film de banlieue’. According to Carrie Tarr (2005: 2), ‘*Banlieue* filmmaking refers to the work of directors aiming to represent life in the deprived housing estates on the outskirts of big French cities. *Cinéma de banlieue*
emerged within French film criticism in the mid-1990s as a way of categorising a series of independently released films set in the rundown multi-ethnic working-class estates’ (Tarr 2005: 2). Another of Carrie Tarr’s arguments is that a common denominator of these banlieue films is their desire to ‘reframe difference’ by reframing the symbolic spaces of French culture, addressing issues of ethnicity and difference in order to question what it means to be French and to speak French. In this vein, Kechiche said, in reference to the suburban vernacular, that he ‘wanted to demystify the verbal aggressiveness and to make it appear in its true dimension of communication code; a pretence aggressiveness that hides a sort of shyness, even fragility, rather than a strictly-speaking violence’. Moreover, the fact that Abdellatif Kechiche is a beur filmmaker, i.e. a 2nd generation North-African immigrant (his parents moved from Tunisia to France when he was 6: he then grew up in Les Moulins, a council-estate of the French southern city of Nice), places his cinema in what has been labelled ‘accented cinema’, defined by the Migrant and Diasporic Cinema in Contemporary Europe’s website as a cinema that ‘comprises different types of cinema made by exilic, diasporic, and post-colonial ethnic and identity filmmakers who live and work in countries other than their country of origin. … Accented films are often bi- or multilingual’. In accented cinema, multilingualism encompasses the use of different languages as well as varieties of the same language, alongside code-switching practices. The choice of the word ‘accented’ is interesting because it does not refer to a phonetic property of the languages displayed in the films, but Naficy (2001) uses the linguistic concept of accent ‘as a trope to highlight that the kind of cinema he identifies is “different” from the standard, neutral and value-free dominant cinema produced by the society’s reigning mode of production’.

L’Esquive is a small budget film. Six weeks of shooting and digital camera filming were economic choices (Melinard 2004). However, they became stylistic choices. As Tarr argues, referring to French-born directors of North-African origin: ‘[t]hey draw on realist modes of filmmaking to demonstrate the basic humanity of the beurs, placing them at the center of the diegesis, privileging points of view which make them subjects rather than the objects of the gaze, and constructing them as complex individuals whose feelings and emotions are likely to elicit sympathy’ (Tarr 2005: 210–11, my emphasis).

Bienvenue chez les Ch’tis (‘Welcome to the sticks’, 2008), the second film studied in this article, does not obviously draw on realistic modes of narration. Its humour relies on the culture shock experienced by a high-ranking post office administrator from the South of France who is transferred to the North of the country; a region he sees as a cold, foreign land inhabited by Barbarians who speak an ‘obscure language’
called *ch’timi*. However, thanks to his employees, especially the postman played by the film director Dany Boon, he soon discovers that, behind the accent that he initially found grotesque, lies a very endearing vernacular and a warm-hearted community. Dany Boon was born in the North of France: his father was of Berber origin, and his mother is a *ch’ti*. On his official website, Dany Boon explains that he made the film for her and to turn the tables on people who hold prejudiced views against the North of France. In his own words, *Bienvenue chez les ch’tis* is an ‘ethnological comedy’. In the film, every member of the northern community speaks the stylised variety, with no difference between sexes, ages, social classes, and most importantly no stylistic variation (whereas, interestingly, the southern character speaks ‘non-accented’ French). The accent is an essential comic motive as this first encounter (1) between the two main characters shows (after the manager’s car nearly runs over his future employee, Mr Bailleul):

(1) Excerpt 1 [0:21]: *Bienvenue chez les ch’tis* (Boon, 2008)

1. *Oh Vindieu, ça va, vous n’êtes pas mort?*
   – The manager: ‘Oh God, you’re not dead?’
2. *Bienvenue monsieur le directeur*
   – Mr Bailleul: ‘Welcome sir’
3. *Monsieur Bailleul?*
   – The manager: ‘Mister Bailleul?’
4. *Ouais sh’est mi. Ouille, Vindiou!*
   – Mr Bailleul: ‘Yes, it’s me. Ouch, God!’
5. *Bougez pas, bougez pas, vaut mieux appeler les secours.*
   – The manager: ‘Don’t move, don’t move, we should call for help’
6. *Non non sha va*
   – Mr Bailleul: ‘No, no, I’m fine’
7. *Oh la la, j’aurais pu vous tuer!*
   – The manager: ‘Oh dear, I could have killed you!’
8. *Non mais c’est pas grave, sha va, j’vous ai reconnu à vot’ plaque qu’est 13, ici c’est 59. J’vous ai fait signe d’arrêter vot’ carrette, mais vous … Mais sha va, j’ai rin, j’ai rin …*
   – Mr Bailleul: ‘No, it’s nothing, I’m fine, I recognized your number plate that shows 13, here it’s 59. I made a sign for you to stop, but you … But that’s ok, I don’t have anything’.
9. *Vot’ mâchoire, vous êtes blessé là?*
   – The manager: ‘Your jaw, you’re hurt?’
10. *Hein?*
    – Mr Bailleul: ‘He?’
11. Vous avez mal quand vous parlez là, non?
   — The manager: ‘It hurts when you speak, no?’
12. Quô?
   — Mr Bailleul: ‘Wha’?"
13. Vot’ mâchoire, ça va là?
   — The manager: ‘Is your jaw ok?’
14. Non, non, non, j’ai mal à ma tchu, j’suis tombé sur ma t’chu, quoi.
   — Mr Bailleul: ‘No, no, I fell on my arse … I fell on my arse’.
15. Le t’chu? Oh la la, c’est pas terrible quand vous parlez. Vous voulez pas qu’on aille montrer vot’ mâchoire à un médecin?
   — The manager: ‘Your arse? Oh dear, it does not sound too good when you speak. You don’t want to see a doctor?’
16. Non, j’ai rin Vindiou!
   — Mr Bailleul: ‘No, I don’t have anything for Pete’s sake!’
17. Oh j’vous assure, vous vous exprimez d’une façon très particulière!
   — The manager: ‘Believe me, you express yourself in a very peculiar way’.
18. C’est parce que j’parle ch’ti sh’est sha?
   — Mr Bailleul: ‘It’s because I speak ch’ti, isn’t it?’
19. Pardon?
   — The manager: ‘Excuse-me?’
20. Bé, j’parle ch’timi quo!
   — Mr Bailleul: ‘I speak ch’timi!’
21. Oh putain, c’est ça le fameux cheutimi?!
   — The manager: ‘Jesus, is this the famous cheutimi?!’

The communication difficulties encountered by the two characters illustrate nicely Lodge’s (1993: 3) description of French prescriptivism as ‘the belief that the ideal state of the language is one of uniformity and that linguistic heterogeneity is detrimental to effective communication is firmly entrenched’. In excerpt (1), I emphasise a few lexical variants used to stylise South and North varieties (note the humoristic variation between Vindieu and Vindiou, lines 1 and 4, that seems to indicate that the two characters have more in common than they believe). The salient phonological features used by Dany Boon to stylise the Picard variety are in bold letters. Pooley’s (1996) work on Picard stereotypical features points out the use of /ʃ/ for standard /s/ (such as ‘sha’ for ça and ‘sh’est’ for c’est in the excerpt — lines 4, 6, 8 and 18). He notes as well that some Picard morphological forms, such as the pronoun mi, are obsolescent. Yet it is used in the dialogue (line 4) by the youngish character played by Dany Boon, surely because the form, being part of the word ch’timi that means ‘it’s me’, is emblematic. With the transcription of ex-
I do not aim to propose a detailed analysis of the Ch’timi lexical or phonetic features present in the film, but rather to show that the accent itself is an object of ridicule. The native speaker is shown as an unintelligible creature (who in this scene looks very much like the famous hunchback of Notre-Dame) and the cause for his peculiar accent is mistakenly thought to be a displaced jaw. As Lodge pointed out regarding folk perceptions of French, the spectator is meant to believe that ‘non-standard varieties are merely failed attempts to express oneself properly’ (Lodge 1993: 6). However, one important difference between L’Esquive and Bienvenue chez les ch’tis is that the Northern variety is not as familiar to every French person as the suburban sociolect is. As, for Coupland (2004: 253), stylisation ‘requires an encultured audience able to read the semiotic value of a projected persona’, the film ought to provide a short introduction to ch’timi pronunciation. It is given to the main character, as early as ten minutes after the beginning of the film, with the very short formula: ‘They [the Northerners] say /o/ instead of /a/, /k/ instead of /ch/ and /ch/ instead of /s/’. The fact that, in the film, the snapshot is comical is due to its reliance on French standard ideology. Furthermore, the performed accent makes use of features that, in the French linguistic imaginary, are interpreted as ‘patois’ or rural. In this vein, it is interesting to note that, in both films, the characters who use accented varieties of French are from a lower class background.6

I will now focus on the first scene of L’Esquive in order to demonstrate that the film uses similar linguistic strategies. The opening sequence of the film shows a group of male friends speaking vehemently about the attack that targeted a few of their peers:

(2) Excerpt 2 [0:01]: L’Esquive (Kechiche 2004)

1. J’vais y aller, j’vais y niquer leur mère!
   – Voice 1 (off-screen): ‘I’m gonna go, I’m gonna fuck their mother!’
2. De toute façon, leur quartier, c’est pas l’Bronx ou quoi, j’vais y aller et j’vais tous leur niquer leur mère!
   – Voice 2 (off-screen): ‘Anyway, their estate is not the Bronx, I’m gonna go and I will fuck their mother to them lot!’
3. Allez, on y va maintenant.
   – Voice 3 (off-screen): ‘Come on, let’s go now’
   – Voice 1 (off-screen): ‘There’s one … I’m gonna get him, I’m gonna do him, this motherfucker’
5. *Le premier qu’on voit là, la vie d’ma mère qu’on lui baise sa mère. Y a qu’ça à faire, y a pas …*
   - Makou: ‘The first we see there, on my mother’s life, we’ll fuck his mother. There’s nothing else to do, there’s no …’

6. *D’vant tout l’monde, les gens y faisaient rien, tu crois c’est normal ou quoi? Ils passent à côté de toi, y m’regardaient.*
   - Slam: ‘In front of everyone, nobody did anything, you think it’s normal or what? They were walking by, looking at me …’

7. *C’est tous une bande de fils de pute!*
   - Fathi: ‘They’re all motherfuckers!’

*(L’Esquiv, L’avant-scène Cinéma 542, 2005)*

I am aware that the transcription and translation of excerpt (2) may give a wrong impression of the scene and that the repetitive use of f* words in a written form may appear grotesque. In the original scene, the characters are often unintelligible and the swearwords are not so salient. The non-standard lexical features (among which only a few are characteristic of the youth vernacular — see my emphasis in the excerpt) are combined with phonological traits (for more detail see Armstrong & Jamin 2002; Fagyal 2003, 2010; Trimaille 2007) to give a general impression. As in *Bienvenue chez les ch’tis*, spectators are alienated and the non-standard variety is first experienced as a foreign language. The performances of both films are meant to be excessive. In *L’Esquiv*, it is an exercise of *tchatche* — i.e. a virtuoso display of suburban slang — in which the teenagers seem to compete for the most abusive language. This first scene puts the spectator in the middle of a group of young men who seem to be discussing a plan to get retaliation over the theft of a bag by a rival gang. It is a tongue-in-cheek depiction of the suburbs, as Kechiche seems to say to the audience: ‘Isn’t this what you expected from the suburbs, i.e. violent language and a violent theme?’

All the actors, apart from Sara Forestier, are amateurs from the Parisian suburbs. Kechiche worked with them for over six months before shooting the film (Swamy 2007: 64) in order to have them appropriate the text (in Gignoux 2004). The spectators are meant to believe that, using Goffman’s terminology (Goffman 1981), the actors are not mere animators of the lines they utter, but they are authors, too. Paradoxically, Kechiche explained that they had to rehearse a lot to find sincerity: ‘I like to give the illusion that everything is true. I want my film to give the impression that what I show is there for real, alive’ (in Piazzo 2004). However, it seems that Kechiche had to go against young actors’ tendency to overdo it. In an interview given for *Libération*, Kechiche (in Aubenas 2004) recalled his amazement, during the exercise of free improvisation that they used to cast actors, at seeing the teenagers’ inability
to do other than reproduce the clichés they hear about the estates. One of the actresses justified this tendency with the fact that the audience expects them to present something impressive. Moreover, regarding the way the script was conceived, Kechiche insisted on the fact that the ‘dialogues were written. Stylisation consisted in striking a balance ..., not going too far in the use of banlieue slang, limiting verlan so that the film would not be incomprehensible’ (in Lalanne 2004).

At this point in the article, it appears clearly that L’Esquive stages linguistic stylisations, even though the film generally adopts a realistic mode of filmmaking. I would now like to discuss to what extent a film may claim to present authentic (linguistic) behaviours per se.

4. Cinematic realism and linguistic stylisation

The depiction of the real in films has always been a hot topic of cinema studies. Many renowned theorists expressed their views on the matter as early as the turn of the 20th century. Later, the famous French film theorist André Bazin remarked, in his seminal article ‘An aesthetic of reality’, that ‘realism in art can only be achieved in one way — through artifice’ (1967: 26). In the same vein, the philosopher Gilles Deleuze (1989: 146) argued that the artist is a ‘creator of truth, because truth is not to be achieved, formed, or reproduced; it has to be created’. With this artificial or created sense of reality, what is implied is that the real is not to be accessed freely. As soon as there is human intervention (i.e. someone holding the camera), there is a bias. And, for technical reasons, this subjectivity will get in the way of any pretence to display the world as it is. For Bazin (1967: 26), filmmakers have to make a selection in the real world of ‘what is worth preserving and what should be discarded’. What is deemed good enough to be preserved in the film is charged with high semiotic value, and what is judged as being redundant, meaningless or incoherent with the ensemble, is discarded (these two processes being very similar to iconisation and erasure as described by Gal & Irvine 1995).

What does this manufactured real entail? It tells us that the real is subverted by ways of representation that ‘operate more or less corrosively and thus do not permit the original to subsist in its entirety’ (Bazin 1967: 27). For Edgar Morin (1980), ‘[i]t is under the cover of “cinema of the real” that we have been shown, proposed, and imposed, the most incredible illusions’. In return, illusions ‘induce a loss of awareness of the reality itself, which becomes identified in the mind of the spectator with its cinematographic representation’ (Bazin 1967: 27). Similarly, Roux (2008: 60) argues that, in Bienvenue chez les ch’tis, ‘the real only exists by the idea that is formed about it, so as to erase any tension or
asperity to the benefit of a deauthentifying fantasy’. However, as mentioned before, Dany Boon does not think of his film as a fantasy but rather, in his own words, as an ‘ethnological comedy’. As for L’Esquive’s director, his film, as realistic as it may be, remains a fiction nonetheless. In an interview with Cineaste, he told a journalist who was questioning him about the L’Esquive’s documentary-like style: ‘It kind of bothers me that you use the word documentary. The film has a script, the actors and actresses did not know each other beforehand, and they came from different schools’ (in Porton 2005: 47). The cinematic depiction of the French suburbs interacts with a general ideological framework about French banlieues (by subscribing to it or opposing it). Furthermore, the varieties displayed in the film and the ambient linguistic ideologies coexist in a dialogical rapport. I have said elsewhere (Planchenault 2008) that, to the extent that a character’s lines respond implicitly to dominant discourses and reflect shared assumptions regarding non-standard varieties, filmic dialogues can be analysed as a source of folk linguistics (Preston 2004). And, to go back to the notion of stylisation, Coupland (2001: 350) argues that ‘it brings into play stereotyped semiotic and ideological values associated with other groups’, hence highlighting them for the analyst.

Generally speaking, one assumes that actors benefit from a verbal agility that allows them to switch easily from one voice to another. Coupland (2001, 2004) says that stylisation implies that actors obviously speak in altera persona, i.e. they put on a voice. Dany Boon is a famous stand-up comedian, well-known for his farcical impersonations, and his Ch’timi persona. In Bienvenue chez les ch’tis, the performance that he accomplishes is a definite exercise of pastiche, a genre that the linguist Fernand Carton calls hyperpicard (in Haydée 2008). In the behind-the-scene documentary that accompanies the DVD, Dany Boon is shown on set, expressing himself in Standard French, but switching to his accented voice as soon as he is hailed by fans. In the same manner, all the other actors of the film, when interviewed for the making-of, express themselves in non-accented French. In the case of non-professionals, one decisive criterion directing the choice to cast an individual has to do with the linguistic flexibility necessary to perform the required role. For L’Esquive, according to Strand (2009), a proof of stylisation is to be found in the fact that the actor playing the sullen and introvert Krimo (Osman Elkharraz) is in fact a ‘self-assured boy from the projects who memorized stylized script written to imitate a contemporary sociolect’ (2009: 265). The dichotomy between stylised performances and reality is not straightforward, as for Coupland (2001: 345): ‘Although stylization is a form of strategic deauthentication, its ultimate relationship with authenticity is complex’. Even though Dany Boon appears to give a
caricature of the Northern dialect, he says that his first goal is to introduce the French audience to the language and culture of his origins. Not only the animator and the author of the dialogues that he voices (he is the scriptwriter and the main performer of *Bienvenue chez les ch’tis*), Dany Boon is also a principal, which for Goffman (1981: 145) means that ‘the individual speaks, explicitly or implicitly in the name of “we”’ — i.e. in the representation of a group. In this vein and according to one of the actresses in the film, Dany Boon is seen by his linguistic community as an ‘ambassador’ of the Ch’timi culture. In the case of *L’Esquive*, even though, as mentioned earlier, actors are not fully the authors of their lines, they, too, can be considered as ‘principals’ (Goffman 1981) because they ‘believe personally in what is being said and take the position that is implied in the remarks’ (1981: 167), or because they believe in the way it is being said.

In the same way that Kechiche battled against prejudices toward youthspeak, Dany Boon, when preparing *Bienvenue chez les ch’tis*, was well aware of the pejorative image associated with strong regional accents. In the making-of, he explained how crucial the choice of the right actress was, as, in his own words, she has to be able to be *sexy* while speaking with a *ch’timi* accent. He then added that it is her accent that makes her moving when she declares her love to the main character. Following the phenomenal success of the film, Dany Boon played a part in restoring the image of the northern vernacular. The success of the film was a godsend for the economy of Nord Pas-de-Calais as it increased the popularity of the region. Quotes from the film were reproduced on T-shirts and souvenirs to be sold to the tourists. Appropriation of film quotes by all sorts of spectators is a common phenomenon (see Kozloff 2000: 27). However, it is quite perplexing to see the film’s stylisations re-appropriated by the linguistic community itself. One example of this is to be seen in the use of ‘biloute!’, which, from the release of *Bienvenue chez les ch’tis*, became a rallying call among film fans (the word itself was commented on by a more purist speaker of *picard*, interviewed in *L’Express* magazine and deemed as being not appropriate to the situation).

In the last section, I have demonstrated that studies of stylisation cannot be limited to excessive cases of pastiche. Taking spectators’ beliefs into account and, in the case of Cod-French accents (such as Poirot’s or Inspector Clouseau’s accents), I found, in past research, that it is often possible for the audience to comment on the quality of an impersonation or on the appropriateness of a voice (Planchenault 2008). However, in the case of the two films studied in this article, because of the fact that the directors and actors are members of the communities that they stylise, this sort of evaluation is rarely given, and stylisations are not always
recognised as such: their performances are then judged not for their quality but rather on the basis of their faithfulness to reality, i.e. their authenticity. In the last section of this article, I will argue that, in this case, second-order indexicality is often misinterpreted as first-order indexicality.

5. Reception of the films and ideological shift

Any research that studies audience perceptions faces the problem of the heterogeneity of its object of analysis as well as the difficulty in accessing diverse types of data. For example, Richardson (2010: 86) mentions that there is an unavoidable bias toward what she calls an ‘articulate audience’, which she defines as ‘viewers with the desire and ability to verbalize their reactions and opinions’. I will first comment on a couple of scientific articles before including the articles that were written during the film release and spectators’ comments. Considering the current trend depicting French varieties of youthspeak as multi-ethnic slang, one would think little at reading the descriptions of L’Esquive’s staged vernacular made by Strand (2009: 263): ‘an aggressive discourse that mixes verlan, a French version of back-slang, with borrowings from languages other than French (Arabic, Wolof, English), a generous sprinkling of profanity, and staged brinkmanship’; or Swamy (2007: 58–59): an ‘Arabic-inflected street slang of the Parisian banlieue’. By first quoting two academic sources, my aim is to show how widespread the iconisation of specific linguistic features is. In most French reviews written on the film for its release, three linguistic features were brought to the forefront: verbal aggressiveness; Arabic influence; and lexical features (verlan – ‘back slang’). (3) presents a few excerpts from the French reviews referring to the violence of L’Esquive’s language:

(3) a. ‘Everyone speaks wildly … resonant outburst, frenzy of words …’
   (Les Cahiers du Cinéma, in Tessé 2004)

b. ‘Words erupt at the speed of a submachine gun’
   (Le Monde, in Piazzo 2004)

c. ‘… in a salvo of indignation in verlan that stays incomprehensible for most people’
   (Les Echos 2004)

d. ‘This language strikes the audience straightaway in the stomach’
   (La Croix, in Gignoux 2004)

With regard to the second linguistic feature used by the media to iconise the suburban youthspeak, newspapers mention the vernacular borrowings from Arabic (La Croix, Les Inrockuptibles). For example, Kaganski (2004), in an article entitled Nique Rohmer! (‘Fuck Rohmer!’) – playing
with the sonorities of the stereotyped formula *Nique ta mère*), starts his review with a pastiche: *Pour le dire dans la langue du film: «Putain, L’Esquive, sur la tête de ma mère, je kiffe sa race, Inch’Allah»* (‘To say it with the language of the film: “Fuck, L’Esquive, on my mother’s head, I bloody love it, God willing”’ – my emphasis). In the film, there are actually a handful of Arabic words: *mabrouk* (‘congratulations’), *hchouma* (‘shame’), *ouallah* (‘I swear’), *tayib* (‘ok’), *Inch’Allah* (‘God willing’), *zarma* (‘that is’), *wesh* (‘what’s up?’), *kahba* (‘whore’).

As for *verlan*, despite Kechiche’s conscious choice to avoid overusing stereotyped lexical features, a few newspapers still mention it. However, it is interesting to note that, in the 117-minute film, hardly 20 words are verlanized and that occurrences of more than one *verlan* word per sentence are rare. Moreover, *verlan* words that are familiar to a general audience (e.g. *ouf, meuf, keum*) are favoured throughout the film. Finally, it is the secondary characters (especially males) that use them most.

Throughout *L’Esquive*, standard French lexicon is dominant. Nevertheless, reviews focused primarily on non-standard features. In these instances, Arabic words and *verlan* forms are perceived as **hypersalient** features or ‘spectacular fragments of language’ (Rampton 1999). For reviewers, the staged suburban vernaculars index an ethnic origin, this perception relying on the French *imaginaire linguistique* (Houdebine-Gravaud 2003). However, one can argue that they relay Kechiche’s desire that the audience should perceive the vernacular’s hybrid origins. Moreover, the newspapers’ focus on non-standard features is not surprising since they are often seen as the heralds of the French norm (and regularly come under attack for not using *correct* French). This position is made clear by excerpt (4) where the journalist ironically adopts Marivaux’s literary French to translate an exoticised sample of youth vernacular:

(4)  
«*Je la kiffe à mort, c‘te bouffonne* s’enflamme Krimo soudain épris de la coquette”

‘I bloody fancy her, the bitch” cries out Krimo, suddenly enamoured with the coquette’  
(Gignoux 2004)

This example shows that exercises of stylisation are not restricted to films, but that they may be demonstrated in film reviews as well. If it is necessary for the audience to be *enculturated* to understand exercises of stylisation (Coupland 2004: 253), it is noticeable that this ability to actively stylise a persona may be shared with the audience.

However, in the same article, the journalist comments on the spontaneity and realism of the dialogues. The ideological stance is erased in favour of a pre-ideological or semiotic level: what the accent supposedly
Gaelle Planchenault
tells about the social or ethnic origin of the characters. This, alongside
the aforementioned comments, seems to indicate that, in the way the
cinematic image flattens a 3 dimensional plan into 2 dimensions, the
viewing of the film operates a flattening of indexical orders, from 2nd
to 1st.

Two weeks after the national release of _L’Esquive_, the Catholic newspa-
per _La Croix_ interviewed a group of young spectators (was it a coinci-
dence that most of them were of African and North African origin?), as
they were leaving the Seine-Saint-Denis theatre after seeing the film, to
ask their impressions of the language. (5) presents some of their com-
ments:

(5) a. Kama
   _Franchement, ils disaient trop de gros mots. Les filles em-
ployent des termes hypervulgaires, c’est exagéré, même si c’est
vrai que ça existe dans certaines cités._
   ‘Sincerely, they swore too much. The girls used really vul-
gar words, that’s exaggerated, even if it’s true that it’s like
that in some estates’

b. Rachid
   _Elle parle comme une racaille, cette meuf._
   ‘She speaks like a scum, this chick’

c. Nawel
   _C’est très cliché et amplifié._
   ‘It’s very cliché and amplified’ (in Bouillon 2004)

It is worth noticing that, by the very fact that they mention processes of
‘amplification’ and ‘stereotypification’, Kama and Nawel concur with
Kechiche’s argument on seeing the film as fiction. Were these spectators
able to read the exercise of stylisation because of the fact that they were
more _encultured_? Kama and Rachid’s comments insist on the inappropri-
ateness of the female characters’ speech. In his review of literature on
youth vernaculars, Pooley (2008) notes that informants attributed the
use of _banlieue_ vernacular to boys and evaluated its use by girls nega-
tively: ‘Such girls challenge the perceived masculine hegemony in terms
of control of sub-cultural capital’ (2009: 336). I argue that it is this idea
that Kechiche favours: a counter-attitude that he chooses at the price of
realism. Interestingly, it seems that, considering the young spectators’
insistence on the vulgarity and violence of the dialogues, Kechiche did
not manage to reach his goal, i.e. to oppose the usual negative cliché
and propose an alternative depiction of youthspeak. However, one
should note that the young people who were asked to judge the authen-
ticity of the staged vernacular are considered as experts, notwithstanding
the fact that their discourse may conform to mainstream prescriptive views (for example, Fagyal 2004 remarks on her young informants’ belief that they spoke bad French). Ironically, Kama’s comment (‘in some estates’) seems to imply that the inappropriate words are used by inhabitants from neighbourhoods other than hers and reinforces a common tendency to associate the disapproved language with the Other.

Finally, if L’Esquive’s linguistic performances did not seem to be validated by the speech community that it depicted, it appears that the contrary happened at the release of Bienvenue chez les ch’tis as Dany Boon was greeted with wild applause by thousands of fans who congregated to welcome their fellow countryman during the film tour in Lille.

6. Conclusion

In this article, I have argued that two very different cases of filmic stylisation entertain complex relations with reality, both in their claim to authenticity/realism and with regard to whether the performances are validated or not by the linguistic community they represent. It appears that the linguistic community depicted may choose to recognise itself in the caricature offered by the films (as was the case with Bienvenue chez les ch’tis), to the extent of taking pride in it, and of re-appropriating linguistic spectacular fragments. One may argue that the genre of the films played a role in the extent to which members of the community were willing to validate the dialectal/sociolectal stylisations. Is it the lack of a formal stance on language, in the case of the comedy, that was felt as less threatening?

The position of authority that is given or not to the authors of the films reflects notions related to an emic or insider’s point of view – the latter associated with the popular belief that the community member knows best. This reminds me of Terry Eagleton’s (1991: 9) statement that ‘ideology is less a matter of the inherent linguistic properties of a pronunciation than a question of who is saying what to whom for what purposes’. I would add that ideology depends on the context in which the discourse appears, on which the right interpretation of the author’s intentions depends. Moreover, as an anonymous reviewer stressed to me, it is noticeable that stigmatised varieties have gained a high value in the linguistic market of cinematic discourses. There has been, since the early days of the cinema industry, a commodification of stylised accents. However, one could argue that what was highly marketable as a skill (i.e. an actor’s competence in impersonating others) has gained, since then and more specifically since voices have been reclaimed by the stigmatised communities, a symbolic value.
To conclude, I would like to highlight a point that I find disturbing: the fact that, despite ‘good’ intentions, both directors’ response to standard language ideology brought them to willingly portray non-standard varieties as unintelligible. I have argued elsewhere (Planchenault 2010) that there is an ideological link between ‘unintelligible’ and ‘non-intelligent’ and what could be regarded as ‘unarticulated’ is often interpreted as indexing ‘non-articulated’ individuals.

Simon Fraser University

Notes
1. Alain Bentolila is a French linguist who is well-known for his mediatised stance on what he calls a ‘linguistic inequality’ (Bentolila 2002) or what he denounces as an affliction suffered by the youth living in underprivileged suburbs. His notorious article entitled ‘Vivre avec 400 mots’ (‘Living with 400 words’, in Potet 2005) was published in Le Monde and was very much debated by journalists and linguists.
2. It is an exercise of stylisation in the Bakhtinian sense as the characters who borrow the prestigious voice stylise the most.
5. The main character is given the corrupt form of the word ch'timi at the beginning of the film — cheutimi is meant to sound like châtiment (‘punishment’) in a comical depiction that shows the North and its inhabitants as the chamber to Hell.
6. A well-loved French movie that previously made an important use of accented French was the two-part drama Jean de Florette/Manon des sources (Berri 1986), which was situated in a small rural village in the South of France.
7. Kechiche said more about the writing of the dialogues in an interview with Cineaste: ‘The script had actually been written more than fifteen years ago. It of course became dated because of the language — this sort of argot naturally evolves over time. So as the filming approached, I had to do some work with a dialogue coach. We would, for example, go into places like McDonald’s where young people gather and record their speech patterns and expressions. I had to do a great deal of work during the casting phase to get the language right. I gave the young people a great deal of freedom during the rehearsal period to explore the best way of saying certain things’ (in Porton 2005: 48).
8. He said that his goal when making the film was ‘to break the caricatured image that is generally given of banlieue: of a violent and scary youth’ (in Fajardo 2004) and ‘to educate the spectator’s gaze’ (in Lalanne 2004).
10. For this study, I benefited from a Press book put together by the British Film Institute.
11. The following lists are established thanks to the edited script by L’avant-scène Cinéma 542 (2005)
12. Among these I found: ouf (‘mad’), téma > matez (‘look’); pêta > taper (‘nick’), oim > moi (‘me’) chelou > louche (‘shady’), chantmé > mèch-
ant (‘terrific’), vénère > énervé (‘on edge’), à oualpé > à poil (‘naked’), keumé > mec (‘guy’), meuf > femme (‘women’), vesqui > esquive (‘dodge’), secla > classe (‘class’), eins > sein (‘breast’), pêcho > choper (‘catch’), noich > chinois (‘Chinese’), guedin > dingue (‘nuts’)

References


Melinard, Michae¨l. 2004. «Cette jeunesse n’a pas de place dans le paysage audiovisuel». Entretiens avec Abdellatif Kechiche. L’Humanité, 7 janvier.


Gaëlle Planchenault is an Assistant Professor in French Applied Linguistics at Simon Fraser University, Vancouver, Canada. In her research, she examines language ideologies and linguistic practices in films, especially relating to French language. Among her recent publications in English are an article on French stylisation in the British Poirot TV series (Sociolinguistic Studies, 2008) and a chapter in an edited book on multilingualism in European Cinema (Polyglot Cinema: Migration and Transcultural Narration in France, Italy, Portugal and Spain, 2011). Address for correspondence: Department of French, 8888 University Drive, Burnaby BC V5A 1S6.