

GLOBAL NOISE, LOCAL LANGUAGE: A SOCIO-ANTHROPOLOGICAL APPROACH OF LANGUAGE AUTHENTICITY IN FRENCH METAL

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Abstract

French metal is mostly sung in English. The noise produced by the instruments (guitar distortion, heavy drums, screams, etc.) allows bands to keep a distance from a clear meaning. In metal, like in any subcultural group, there is a wish to remain ambiguous. The use of a foreign language then falls under the same phenomenon. Nevertheless, looking at the few bands that choose to use French in their music, it is noticeable that other dimensions such as authenticity, gender and nationalism are at stake.

Introduction

“The problem with singing in English is that we can’t be broadcasted on radio (...). My culture is not the French chanson, even if I do like some French artists. In fact, our culture is rock n’roll. I’ve been listening to Aerosmith since I was a kid (...), so I sing in English because it’s the way I express myself since the beginning. I’ve never sung in French.” (Stéphane Buriez, Loudblast’s singer)

“With the French singing, I feel way more engaged with my own lyrics compared to when we used to sing in English, everything makes more sense now.” (Metal singer, in Walzer, 2007, p. 205)

During the 1990s, the situation for French metal bands could hardly be considered as favorable. On the one hand, while most of the bands from the “extreme metal” wave were used to singing in English, the French language became the center of political attention in France. Indeed, since the 1st of January 1996, radio channels had to broadcast 40% of songs in French and, within this quota, 20% of new talents. On the other hand, most of the French media, except the metal oriented press, ignored or stigmatized metal music.

Singing in English was obviously not the only reason for French bands to be marginalized. Bands singing in French did not enjoy a greater deal of success, except on a few occasions that I will try to address here. More specifically, knowing that going beyond the national frontiers is one of the very feature of metal (Wallach, Berger and Greene, 2011), I want to clarify and analyze in this article the role played by the choice of language in French metal band’s careers. As a communication tool, language carries cultural values that are often related to a nation. It is especially the case for the French language as it that played a fundamental role in the creation of the Republic (Giordan, 2002). This is why its use can be in contradiction with a *modern* and *global* trend such as metal.

A conversation between two metalheads about language choice is not a common thing, compared to topics such as riffs, speed of drums, etc. Sounds cross borders more than languages. In his survey, Robert Culat noticed that only 2% of the metal fans became so because of “the lyrics or the message” in the music, and 4% think the quality of the lyrics are decisive in what they consider to be a “good band” (Culat, 2007). However, 23% consider the lyrics as a key feature of metal music. Then, if the voice is more praised for its sound than for its message, lyrics do matter in the sense that they have to fit the apocalyptic dimension of the music (Walzer, 2007, p. 205). Beyond the content of the lyrics, the choice of the appropriate channel is what interests me here, in its socio-anthropological dimension. In metal, language matters maybe more to the one who sings than to the one who listens. The attachment to the lyrics allows the singer to increase the intensity of his/her art, as the citation above suggests. Thus, the main question for a singer is to identify the language in which he/she will provide the most powerful feelings, depending on criteria such as sincerity, masculinity or authenticity, but also on his/her linguistic ability and market ideologies on language and universalism.

Despite the historical orientation of this paper, it is obvious I do not aim at building a typology of all the French metal bands regarding the language they used. My intent here is to address certain sociological and anthropological aspects of the language choice in metal music by focusing on examples that are regularly evoked in articles and interviews I conducted.

Hard and French: “Ca vient, ça meurt” (“It comes, it dies”)

The first wave of hard rock and heavy metal bands did start by singing in French. Their technique was often connected to the lyric vocal tradition of bands such as Sortilège or Satan Jokers. Lyrics were more understandable than with the death growl technique that appeared several years later. In this sense, preferring the vernacular language can be understood as a desire for the lyrics to be heard. This is particularly relevant for the band Trust (1977-1985) which is now considered as an emblematic band from that era. Their lyrics were very political (their single “Antisocial” was a huge success), close to the left-wing punk rock themes, more social and realistic compared to the dark and occult imagery that is often used in metal. The French language was used here as an evident way to “give a message” to the French-speaking audience. The rest of the bands from that era were not as famous and significant as Trust, but they had a tendency to oscillate between realistic anti-establishment themes (Vulcain, “Le Soviet Suprême” for instance) like Trust and dark or fantasy themes (Vulcain, “Le Fils de Lucifer”).

However, more than the lyrical content or the potential lack of singers’ proficiency in English, the hegemonic use of French seemed to rest essentially on the music industry context. Indeed, the French mainstream industry was mainly focused on the French market (Bénard, 2007, p. 370) and could not consider could not consider promoting a band singing in any other language than French. At that period, the labels did not have any radio quota to constrain themselves to produce and promote francophone popular music. On the contrary, German labels were already encouraging their bands to sing in English or at least to have English versions of some of their songs, even when these bands were French (see the example of Sortilège in Bénard, 2007, p. 261). Moreover, most of French heavy metal’s production was not loud enough compared to all other international production, sounding more like the French

variété (standard French pop) according to Touché, Guibert and Hein (2006). From my point of view, these light-sounding early metal productions have much to do with the common negative representation of French in metal music.

Paradoxically, heavy metal bands singing in English at that period were to be found in the underground French scene, especially the one derived from the French punk rock scene. Shakin' Street played at the Mont-de-Marsan punk festival in 1976 and 1977, and Ganafoul signed a contract with the independent label Crypto. Even at this early stage of metal music, the language choice was very linked to the music production process. Nevertheless, except Trust singing for instance "Le Mitard" (a song about the famous French criminal Jacques Mesrine), the use of French in the first wave of heavy metal was not particularly connected to the performance of any French identity. Indeed, the symbols, themes or images used by French heavy metal bands such as Attentat Rock or Satan Jokers were not very different from English and American bands.

Keeping death metal global and French local

For Dick Hebdige, each subculture represents "noise" in the realm of common media expressions. This term "noise" is also the one that laypersons used to employ to describe metal music. While the heavy metal was being increasingly despised and mocked in the 1980s, a more "noisy" wave of metal was growing. This wave of extreme metal represented a much more spectacular semantic disorder by resorting to gore or satanic images and, on a musical level, to extremely distorted guitars, drum blast beats and death growls. Even though these new expressions were about to be incorporated both ideologically and commercially, the absence of a clear meaning was the basis of the community gathering around them. Was the French language then *too significant* for a subculture that claimed to be outside the norm? Indeed, over the late 1980s and early 1990s in France, the extreme metal wave, especially death metal, was marked by a predominant use of English (Bénard, 2007, p. 266). Moreover, beyond the semantic and musical level, this new kind of metal was distributed on a global scale, despite its underground dimension.

Even when they knew little about the English language and could not write proper lyrics, French bands found a way – sometimes very complex – to use this language. For instance, the band Supuration (1989-present) had so many problems with speaking English that they could not communicate with the bands they were touring with. But they were still singing in English. To do so, the singer would write first in French. His lyrics were deep rhyming stories with "hallucinating" elements. Then he would send them to an English friend he met through the tape-trading network. She would translate them in English and try to keep the rhyme scheme (Grima, 2013, p. 281) and send them back. Everything for free.

How can this linguistic shift be understood? Many bands from that era were seeking a contract with a foreign label, while the few French extreme metal labels existing were more interested in signing foreign bands (Hein, 2004, p. 210). The label Osmose, for instance, used to achieve 95% of its financial turnover thanks to foreign bands. For being so underground, this second wave of French metal avoided the major labels' linguistic filter. They could sing as the bands they loved: Slayer, Napalm Death, Carcass, etc. Moreover, the "do it yourself" spirit of this new scene made the music practice even more "magical", in the sense that it allowed many lower-class young men to do something different from what they were told; it permitted them to symbolically escape

from their social and geographical background. Learning and singing English then played an important role in this emancipation process:

“We don’t feel like we belong to the Landes (*a southwestern region of France*). Personally, I belong to Earth, I’m just an earthling and I feel human. Sometimes they say ‘les landais’ (*people living in that region*) about us, but it doesn’t mean anything. Our mother is American, her grandparents are from the Azores, which is an island in the middle of the Atlantic, our father is French, Jean-Michel (*another member of the band*) is from Basque Country, he’s not from the Landes either. It’s true we rehearse in the Landes, we live there but that’s it. We’re more concerned by Earth and humanity. Humanity is in a bad shape; the consciousness level is pretty low. That’s probably why our lyrics are so dark.” (Gojira, *W-fenec.org*, April 2002)

Even if they do not directly refer to the English language, there is obviously a desire to avoid any type of particularism, which is certainly ironic given the long tradition of universalism in French culture. Another bias to this universalist quest relies in the mainly white and male composition of the audience. Indeed, while metal artists were symbolically escaping social reality with their songs in English about the occult and fantasy, non-white artists were creating a new flow in French, rapping about their lifestyle and neighborhood, symbolically asking for more recognition or integration into the French society.

The massive use of English in extreme metal is also to be linked to a contentious relationship with the French language itself. Loudblast (1985-1999) was one of the most successful bands from that era. In an interview⁴⁷, Loudblast’s vocalist explained that, as they started to become successful, their label wanted them to try to sing in French in order to be broadcasted on the radio. The “language strategy” was clear here: this was not an aesthetic or artistic decision. Loudblast members still gave it a try, by translating one of their already English-written songs. Suddenly their heavy death metal sounded, in their opinion, as kitsch and ridiculous as the old French rocker Johnny Hallyday. The song was never released and seemed to keep being a trauma for the band. The “difficulty” to sing in French is actually shared by many other English-singing bands. French was more likely to be seen as inauthentic, in the sense of a mainstream language (*variété*) that could not express the true essence of metal.

This concept of authenticity (resemblance to the hegemonic norm, perceived as universal) is opposed to another one: authenticity as a wish to be incomparable, unique and original. Therefore, a few bands tried to sing in French, arguing the specificity of their art. This was the case for Misanthrope (1989-present), which was mentioned in the previous Loudblast’s interview as a band that “does well with the French language (...) thanks to the whole concept of their music”. Here the idea was that the adoption of a deviant language (opposite to the English norm) had to do with the specific symbolic imagery of the same language. In that case, Misanthrope’s art was, in their words, “made of the eternal France’s values... a fallen and flouted grandeur that keeps burning into our hearts”⁴⁸. The French language thus had to be justified by stereotypical elements (here the so-called French past greatness mixed with dark romanticism).

⁴⁷ “Une dose de metal, épisode 23 (Loudblast)”, *L’Enorme TV* [online], <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ROEt6mECh4w>

⁴⁸ “Misanthrope - Interview bonus”, *Obsküre magazine*, January-February 2012.

This necessary justification of the choice of a language other than English can only be noticed in metal oriented media. In fact, it was the opposite in the mainstream media, where English-singing artists have been often questioned⁴⁹ and not only in metal⁵⁰. This linguistic ideology in the media also existed in the music industry. Many bands highlight the fact that labels and bookers would not gamble on a French singing band unless the language was used as an exotic feature so the music could be commercialized through this means. Thus, does singing in a language other than English restrict bands in a strange and modern folklore, as it did to Rammstein? Indeed, despite the use of its native language, the German band partly owes its success to the possibility that the audience could connect their music to a certain kind of germanity. The German identity in Rammstein relies mainly upon the use of the German language and a specific ambiguous pronunciation related to German cabaret and, yet ironically, Nazi speeches (Kahnke, 2013). In the manner of Rammstein, several French bands did not object being commercialized through this exotic feature. The power heavy metal band Manigance (1995-present) justified their choice for French this way: “We signed a contract with a Japanese label thanks to our French singing. They liked the exotic nature of our music”⁵¹. Misanthrope has also been selling quite well abroad (Eastern Europe, South America, Japan⁵²) despite the French singing, proving that a band’s linguistic specificity is not a fundamental obstacle to be praised in another linguistic area. Thus, if the remaining question is how bands deal with their own national identity, the example of black metal reveals different issues.

Black metal, a new obscurantist order

As a primary lo-fi and underground genre, black metal has a greater tradition of bands singing in their mother tongue, especially highly influential Norwegian bands like Burzum, Dimmu Borgir (until *Stormblåst* album), Windir or Ulver. In France, after the Black Legions era (1993-1997), made of mainly English singing bands, the first successful French singing band was Seth (1996-2004), on their album *Les Blessures de l’âme* (1998)⁵³. Made of dark and romantic lyrics and keyboards, the album got noticed among the underground French scene and the band signed a contract with the growing French label Season of Mist. Even though the French language was clearly one reason for their success, they returned to English (their first demo was in English), arguing in an interview I conducted that French was “too soft” and “romantic”. In a certain way, French could not express the whole fierceness of their art. For other bands, French could be mixed with ancient languages, such as Greek, German or old English, in Deathspell Omega (1998-present) or Anorexia Nervosa’s music for instance. This complex mix actually found a positive response from the metal audience all around Europe.

Anorexia Nervosa (1995-2005) always worked on nihilist themes and the language choice always was spontaneous and undetermined (with the singer’s ability in languages as the only limit): “It’s only a matter of feeling. It really depends on what I want to express, some stuffs do sound better in French than English, and vice-versa, some others it’s more in German. For me it’s not calculated.”⁵⁴

⁴⁹ Loudblast in “Ca se discute”.

⁵⁰ Cats and Trees in “On n’est pas couché”, Singtank in “Boomerang”.

⁵¹ *Hardrock80.com*, May 2006 [online], <http://www.hardrock80.com/PAGEinterview/MANIGANCE.htm>

⁵² “Misanthrope - Interview bonus”, *Obskure magazine*, January-February 2012.

⁵³ They had released an English singing EP the year before

⁵⁴ *Lahordenoire.free.fr*, August 2002 [online],

<http://lahordenoire.free.fr/interview.php?art=152#.VGHW3oURsy5>

More than just a game of sonorities, the band Forbidden Site (1993-2003) perceived the language as a way to appear more sincere towards their own culture and audience. The band used to wear the fleur-the-lys, a symbol of the French royalty, even without belonging to any royalist party⁵⁵. Their aesthetics were based on a fantasized and glorious past of France (the same stereotype used by Misanthrope), accompanied by references to French romantic authors. It created a meaningful space for the use of French without diverting what they thought was the essence of black metal.

Peste Noire (2000-present) is another emblematic example of the French black metal scene, where there is a clear search for an authentic but this time “pure” French spirit. In this case, no romanticism was called up. On the contrary, Peste Noire is much more inspired by old grotesque and scatological French tales⁵⁶. By rejecting any type of fairytale or fantasy that so many other bands resort to (like Alcest, who was, ironically, one of the early contributor of Peste Noire), the band also carries a very complex political discourse proclaiming itself to be “reactionary anarchist” (*anarchiste de droite*). In any case, the nationalist dimension of many black metal bands drives them to use the French language more regularly, through a negotiated or fantasized vision of what they think the French essence is.

However, in the manner of bands from the Black Legions (Belketre, Mütilation, Torgeist, Vlad Tepes, etc.) and Seth’s evolution, an important part of the French black metal scene has kept singing in English. These bands were/are less political and had/have a tendency to work on, say, “classical Satanist, occult or dark themes”: Merrimack, Vorkreist, Temple of Baal, Caïnan Dawn, Myrkvid, Malepeste, Christicide, The Great Old Ones, Supplicium, etc. The French language can sometimes be called up for spoken word parts of a song, during interludes or on soft melodies. For instance, extracts from H. P. Lovecraft’s French translated books are read on the album *Tekeli-li* from The Great Old Ones. French spoken word can also be found in the last Seth’s album *The Howling Spirit*. Even if these last two bands’ singers evoke aesthetical reasons during the interviews, I just demonstrated that the language choice is inseparable with a political stance, or at least with considerations of authenticity (in the sense of incomparable). The French singing black metal band Belenos recently integrated Breton (the regional language from Brittany), arguing that French had become a little banal in black metal and that he (the singer) should take advantage of the fact that he lives in Brittany do be different from other bands⁵⁷.

Nu metal: the French medicine cake?

More than any other metal genre, nu metal reached a very large audience in France, with the French rapping as a main feature. In nu metal, the academic French was often inflected (as it already was in hip hop) by creating new words or cryptic expressions (“Egalamonégo” from Watcha, “Star FM-R” and “Nawak” from Pleymo, *Biatchs* from Enhancer, etc.). Nu metal also contained a political dimension with lyrics protesting against what was perceived as a decadent society (Hein, 2004, p. 209). Bands like No One Is Innocent (1994-present), Silmarils (1989-present) or Lofofora (1989-present) were the center

⁵⁵ *Ablazine.com*, February 2003 [online], <http://www.ablazine.com/interviewsfr-12.html>

⁵⁶ *La Mesnie herlequin*, March 2013 [online], <http://www.lamesnieherlequin.com/2013/03/interview-kpnv/>

⁵⁷ *Metalship.org*, July 2012 [online], <http://fr.metalship.org/interviews/221-Belenos>

of a huge media and public attention in the middle of the 1990s. All of them signed contracts with major labels (in the same order Polygram, Warner and Virgin) and benefitted from great promotional resources compared to the extreme metal French scene. Apart from the language, belonging to a specific network was indeed one of the main fractures between these two scenes (nu and extreme), given the fact that nu metal bands have always been closer to the mainstream industry (especially true for Pleymo, Enhancer and one period of Watcha's career) or rock labels (Aqme and Mass Hysteria signed contracts with At(h)ome), and never collaborated with "extreme" labels such as Osmose or Season of Mist. Considering that the major labels had not been very interested in metal until the rise of nu metal, the rest of the scene saw this new genre as "fake" or too commercial and was often disposed to question nu metal band's masculinity to discredit them, calling them and their fans "fags" (*tafi-oles*). This was also because nu metal was prone to attract a more female audience. If the use of French was already considered as "soft" or "gentle" for those playing extreme metal, the fracture with nu metal bands resulted in a much more significant rejection of that language. Many metal bands' reaction in interviews show how impossible it would be for them to sing in French, risking to sound ridiculous, stupid or even gay.

However, the political commitment and the male aura of certain famous bands like Lofofora led to a new scene, mixing the French protest dimension of early nu metal and extreme metal sonorities. L'Esprit du Clan (1995-present) and The ARRS (1998-present) both sing in French and were pioneers in French metalcore, a scene that stayed relatively underground until now, unlike the American one. In fact, after these two bands, there were almost no significant examples of French singing metalcore or deathcore bands. The only one I could find was the Avignon based deathcore band Kombur (2012-present) that released an EP in French, claiming their influence from L'Esprit du clan (in terms of singing), but more for reasons of "sincerity" than for their political message. Talking about L'Esprit du clan, Kombur's singer argued:

"I didn't want the political part, only the personal one, where you use all the emotions you have inside. That is very interesting. This why the EP is in French, it made it possible to get everything off my chest, to be an outlet."⁵⁸

To him, music should not be about politics. Therefore he "gave up" with French after that EP, arguing that they wanted to make a living out of their music and find a label abroad, as if it was too hard to keep the French singing without being political, especially when you aim at an international career. For instance, one of the most successful bands in this deathcore genre is the Paris based band Betraying The Martyrs (2008-present), where the first French singer has been replaced by a British one, and where no political commitment in the manner of L'Esprit du Clan could be noticed.

Besides, coming back to the French nu metal scene, major labels never succeeded at setting up international marketing strategies. With its Japan tour, Pleymo (1997-2007) might have been the exception to the rule. Indeed, since the French major labels were international holdings branches, they already had plenty of "international" bands (which means English singing ones) and were not inclined to take more risks with French singing bands. Moreover, the more bands were signing contracts with major labels, the less efficient their political message. The second wave of nu metal was in fact much more focused on teenage matters, as Pleymo and Watcha's career evolution attest to. The

⁵⁸ Personal interview, September 2014.

interesting fact with Watcha (1994-2008) is that, after losing their fanbase and media support because of their pop song “Un Jour”, they released a very heavy (almost extreme) album in English: *Falling by the Wayside* (2008). They even argued that English was their first singing tongue and that they used to sing in French through spite, because there was no other way to grow in France⁵⁹. So even for the nu metal scene, the French language was not always a “natural” or spontaneous choice.

On the contrary, other bands such as Eths claim not to sing in French by marketing choice, but as a true part of their musical identity. Talking about the French metal scene, Eths’ singer declared:

“There are bands like Gojira that have an international stature. I wouldn’t be enough pretentious to say that we have it too, because first we sing in French and people always tell us it’s a barrier, but we’ll never sing in English, French is part of our identity.”⁶⁰

Not to mention the singer’s difficulties with the English language, it is interesting to notice that the same band affirms not to have any political message, compared to other nu metal bands⁶¹. On the contrary, what they seek is that “anybody can have his/her interpretation of the lyrics”. Here there is a wish to stay undefined in terms of meaning. Thus, this “aesthetics of incomprehensibility” (Szego, 2003) is *also* to be found in the case of French singing bands. In fact, for Eths: “Writing in French gives you much more work if you want it to sound good, to sound more English, in harmony with the music... this is the hardest part”. This feature makes the writing particularly complicated for these bands, more than English singing bands, in the sense that they have to turn a (very) comprehensible language (French) into a “partly meaningless” aesthetic object, in order to stay authentic. Indeed the injunction to use a clear language, with no ambiguity, is intimately linked to dominant conceptions of social order: “The limits of acceptable linguistic expression are prescribed by a number of apparently universal taboos. These taboos guarantee the continuing ‘transparency’ (the taken-for-grantedness) of meaning” (Hebdige, 1979, p. 91). This is a part of what keeps this music in an “acid state” (Seca, 2001), what keeps it as a subculture, also what keeps it authentic, whether the bands sing in French or not. For instance, Gojira sings in English and is a clear example of the same aesthetics of incomprehensibility:

“I believe what we do is like a mantra. No matter the language, a mantra is made of words that the audience doesn’t really need to understand. The point of the mantra for the audience is to increase the energy... it’s the physical impact. How does it affect the one who listens, what does it do in the mouth of the one who sing? The strength of what you say, people don’t perceive on an intellectual level, they perceive it with their heart and body. When we play a show, even if the audience doesn’t get the lyrics, they can feel what’s behind.”⁶² Consequently and once again, the chosen language is the one that makes more sense to the singer regarding what he/she wants to express, but does not depend much on the audience’s literal comprehension.

⁵⁹ *Leseternels.net*, October 2007 [online], <http://www.leseternels.net/interviews.aspx?id=70>

⁶⁰ *Zyvamus.com*, April 2006 [online], <http://www.zyvamus.com/eths-interview-zyva-printemps-de-bourges/>

⁶¹ *Leseternels.net*, May 2012 [online], <http://www.leseternels.net/interviews.aspx?id=379>

⁶² *W-fenec.org*, May 2003 [online], <http://www.w-fenec.org/metal/gojira,898,interview-a-boulogne-mer-mai-2003.html>

Conclusion

Even if the French language remains rare in metal, there is one constant: it is almost always the domain of a non-instrumentalist singer. Indeed, from Seth to Silmarils, Misanthrope, Pleymo, Celeste, The ARRS or L'Esprit du Clan, they all have a singer that does not play any instrument; while English is generally more the work of instrumentalist singers (Gojira, Loudblast, Supuration, The Great Old Ones, etc.). The bilingual (French-English) band Psykup that I interviewed is a relevant case of this linguistic distribution, given that Julien (the guitarist singer) claimed his clear preference for English, while Milka (the non-instrumentalist singer) started a post-rock band in French (Agora Fidelio) before returning to English in *My Own Private Alaska*, but this time for explicit exportation reasons⁶³.

In her article “All Singers Are Dicks”, Deena Weinstein (2005) stressed all the features that can isolate a singer from the rest of his/her band and make him/her appear arrogant or opportunist. One of these features is that the singer's authenticity differs from pop singers whose “attitude is shaped by each particular song”. Indeed, a rock or metal voice has to feel true or at least give an illusion of veracity. All rock and metal singers write their own material and are being judged on their capacity to “signify” an emotion more than on their singing skills. Yet, when a singer does not play any instrument, there seems to be a need to signify more with his/her voice, which is why they tend to try to use their native language more. That also makes them vulnerable to intrusive questions about their art. Thus choosing English is also a way to protect themselves, even if the price to pay is the loss of a part of their authenticity, a part of the soul the audience is seeking. Given this authenticity's model, this is maybe why it is complicated for non-native English speakers to break through the international market in English. If singing in English is nowadays so commonly admitted, it is definitely not because metal singers are more eager to sell their soul to the devil than others, but due to cultural tensions inherent in the modern globalized world.

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⁶³ *Leseternels.net*, May 2008 [online], <http://www.leseternels.net/interviews.aspx?id=179>