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The urban vocabulary of social stigma in late 20th century French

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I cannot tell you how many cars were burnt in the night of New Year's Eve : our Ministre de l'intérieur has decided that it is a State secret (he is also the man who has been found guilty of racist statements in public / by a court a few months ago).

But what I can do is inviting you to discuss some aspects of the vocabulary of social stigma in contemporary French. Let's consider first a series of weird sentences that can be currently observed in the media (quotes No 10, 11 & 12)

« Les quartiers se sont embrasés dans la nuit de la Saint Sylvestre. »

« La gauche est perçue dans les quartiers comme un conservatoire de valeurs intangibles [...] » (François Durpaire, « Historien des identités à Paris-I », Le Monde, 23/12/2010)

« Les quartiers ont envahi le centre de Marseille. »

« Quartier » can be a rather generic, weakly marked word which means (let's put it simply) « un quartier », « a district » or, more formally, an official subdivision of a town – in other contexts, it can be loaded with a nuance of emotional investment and mean « mon quartier », « my neighbourhood » or « notre quartier ».

Quite interestingly, two operations have been recently made on this word :

First, « les quartiers » (when used in the plural) now refers specifically and exclusively to poor and socially threatening districts in urban peripheries of French cities. The origin of

this lexical innovation is easy to locate : over the past thirty years, a number of « quartiers » have been spotted as targets for the « politique de la ville » or « de développement social des quartiers » (a policy extensively studied by Marie-Hélène Bacqué) – accordingly, they were named by the bureaucrats and politicians in charge (No 13) : « quartiers de développement social » [like in the former « developing countries » – which did not develop at all], or « quartiers difficiles » [hard, complicated – for whom ?], « quartiers sensibles » [touchy !], etc. Such euphemisms are built on a pattern that can be quite often observed in the 20th century reformist vocabulary (bureaucratic, professional or legal) : like in « dilapidated neighbourhoods » or « substandard housing » for « slums », etc. One can also find « quartiers d’exil » – coined by a pair of sociologists who were also poets (No 14). After a while, non-technical speakers dropped the qualification and only kept « quartiers » to refer to poor districts in « les banlieues ». The beginnings of this shift are unclear. Marseilles has possibly played a role in it : people there say that Marseilles has no « banlieue », it has « les quartiers nord », in short « les quartiers » : the derivation in this case seems to be from the bottom up – but was it from the inside ?

The second operation made on « quartier » is a classical metonymy by which the inhabitants are named by the word that usually refers to the territory on which they live : « toute la ville en parle », « the whole town is talking about it », « la risée du quartier » or No 12. However, in the case we are discussing, all of the inhabitants are not equally referred to : « les quartiers » indeed means « les jeunes des quartiers ». At this point a rather precise social profile is attached to the word : a young male, « arabe » or « noir », unemployed and possibly living on petty trafficking, and wearing a very definite set of clothes. In extreme rightist versions of this discourse (that of President Sarkozy, for instance) a synonym to this is : « la racaille », « scum ». In the urban vocabulary of urban social stigma there often is metonymy, but also concentration, displacement and connotation.

« Les quartiers » (in the plural) – in spite of its « neighbourly » dimension – can be described, I think, as an exogenous denomination. There are some other ones in use today that mean more or less the same for the same speakers : « les banlieues » is the most widely used.

Before the 1980s, the word was generally used in the singular (« la banlieue ») for referring to a broad urban belt that had been sprawling since the beginning of the century for accommodating industries and workers in the periphery of cities, but also the

lower middle class, the middle class and some of the rich. There was « Paris et sa banlieue », but in spite of the singular, « la banlieue » was many (No 21 & 22). « La banlieue Ouest » was wealthy, « la banlieue rouge » solidly voted for the communist party. « Les banlieusards » (No 25) would spend hours commuting in their cars or suburban trains. « Banlieusard », by the way, was coined in 1889, at roughly the same time when the English elite began to talk of « suburbanites » and look down on « suburbia ». It was a word of contempt, but it had been taken over by some of the people stigmatized by it – (see quote No 23 : in this case local petty notables who were angry at the way members of the Paris council talked of them). « Banlieusards » was intensively used in the 1960s and 70s when the phenomenon of (No 26) « les banlieues nouvelles », « les banlieues-dortoirs », « les grands ensembles » attracted attention and comment. But it is worth to note that « banlieusards » almost disappeared since « les banlieues » began to mean the same as « les quartiers ».

Sylvie Tissot has well documented how « le problème des banlieues » has emerged in the 1980s through interactions within a rather limited network of civil servants, politicians, intellectuals (among which sociologists) and journalists who were eager to give a meaning to the first wave of urban riots which began in 1981 (No 27 & 28). By the end of the decade the nature of the issue was decided upon : it was an urban problem, the result of a process of social and spatial « exclusion ». The « problème des banlieues » was born (not unlike the « inner city problem » was constructed in the US in the 60s). It was only left to other actors and speakers to add a pinch of ethnicity to it and « Les banlieues de l'Islam » began to made the headlines (No 30).

A new commonsense had been constructed and an overwhelming majority of journalists and politicians in contemporary France seem to share it. Foreign observers – journalists in the first place – confirm : their job indeed is to point out what is nationally specific in what they report to their people. Is not « banlieue » the ultimate in Frenchness today ? I noticed that a number of British reporters believe it.

Or may be is it a mere question of words ? This leads me to the central question of my paper :

Why should it be interesting to study vocabulary ?

I do not answer the question from the view point of a linguist, which I am not, but of sociologist or an historian. My answer would be : because language plays a major part in the process of instituting shared beliefs and cognitive forms. One might also say in the

process of shaping commonsense or – in the present context – political consent. Whoever wins the battle on words has already won the ground in politics – everybody knows this.

I wish to stress that I'm talking of words, not of ideas or concepts.

Concepts are categories which can be precisely defined by their extension or comprehension : they belong to professional bodies of learned people who have jurisdiction on them. Like the Being, concepts have shepherds. Concepts are supposedly parts of some kind of axiomatics which exists apart or aside from common language – they are ready to be expressed by different words that may belong to different languages – Concepts as such do not belong to any specific tongue : we can read Kant or express the theorem of Thales in English or French alike. At least most philosophers and scientists believe all of this.

I do not wish to talk of ideas either. Ideas can be defined as statements on which one can argue. Ideas can be made explicit – one can differ or agree on them. Their realm is that of dispute – and decision about right and wrong. « Ideology », an interesting word, stresses both explicitness and cohesiveness of a set of ideas – when it doesn't merely mean the wrong ideas of one's opponent.

Words do not share any of the features I just mentioned. They are signifiers the meaning of which is determined only by usage – by both the language or system to which they belong and the local situation of enunciation. The signified is not firmly nor even directly related to the signifier and no one fully controls their relationship. Words are common resources that speakers use without much thinking of it – one doesn't need (and have no time) to define them before use – they are supposed to make sense in a roughly similar manner for any partner in a conversation. They even make the conversation possible because they are ambiguous enough, partly undetermined. They often refer to something rather clear and compact at its centre, but with blurred limits. Words never come alone : they are part of semantic fields that are systematically organized by oppositions, gradations, equivalences. They denote but also connote : they signify by the associations of meanings they may have in local situations. They can be played with, twisted, abandoned, reactivated, transported from a register to another, loaded with new meanings. Lexical innovations can only occur indeed within limits because they must be understood if they are to be successful. There are innovations nevertheless. They are events, but they are not easy to locate in society and history. E.P. Thompson nicely notes about the difficulty of putting a date on the neologism « unemployment » in 19th

c. Britain : « Cucoos usually arrive in these islands some weeks before they are announced in the *Times* » (p. 776, n. 2).

This approach to words is that we have chosen for the international programme « Les Mots de la ville » which has been developing over a decade and recently lead to the publication of a big fat book : « L’Aventure des mots de la ville » – it is a multilingual dictionary of some sort, which I have no time to describe but which I think you would enjoy to visit. Each article tells the story (or history or adventure) of one word in one language, it documents how various acceptations of the word have developed in various contexts. The idea was to unfold in time the lists of acceptations one can find in standard dictionaries – or, if one looks at the present state of a language as if it were a landscape, we have tried to reconstruct the geological events that gave birth to it. We have worked on lexical systems : meanings are interrelated, new words or acceptations usually imply some degree of restructuring of other words’ meanings. We also have worked on lexical events : we have tried to locate usages and innovations in time and space, to identify speakers and contexts – who speaks and within which register, to whom and for what purpose ?

I feel a little awkward when saying such things to this audience. What I just said may be wholly self-evident for linguists, it may as well be seen as naive or outdated lexicography : I hope you let me know soon, preferably in a gentle manner. Among the 160 authors of « l’Aventure » there are numbers of historians, anthropologists, geographers and so on, but only a score of linguists. One reason among others could be that historical sources make it difficult or even impossible to reconstruct situations of enunciation and actual acts of speech. We have tried to learn as much as possible from pragmatic linguistics, but have remained quite unable to practice it properly.

Our standpoint also originate in many other strands of research that blossom in some quarters of contemporary social sciences – some thinking in French indeed, but in English and other languages as well. Let me just mention them : a reflexive turn in many disciplines that leads to questioning the categories scholars use to speak of distant times, cultures or classes – a renewed interest among historians in the discrepancies between the vocabulary of the sources and the vocabulary of the scholar – a constructionist mood in sociology and political science – the revival of questions on the practice of translation – more generally the present interest in transfers, circulations, etc., in a supposedly global world. I would love to develop some of those points if you gave me a chance in the

discussion. At the moment, I wish rather try to show with a case study what kind of result all of this can lead to.

The word « cité » is a nice case in point

« La cité des 4000 », « ma cité », « notre cité », on the one hand – « la cité d'en face », « les cités », « les jeunes des cités », on the other one : this is a word used by insiders and outsiders as well. This is a word that belongs today to everybody. It also may belong to the vocabulary of social stigma.

Its more common contemporary acceptation is this : a set of multi-family dwelling houses (mostly des « barres » et des « tours » – slab blocks and highrises), built with public loans and grants (mostly des « hlm »), located in the periphery of cities and towns and frequently poorly serviced by public transportation and other utilities, planned as a whole for accomodating low-income families, which are mostly tenants of municipal or other public or non-profit landlords. A quite accurate translation in British English would be « council estate » or « estate » (a similar irony laying in « cité » et « estate » : I come back to this soon) ; and in American English « project ».

Since the late 70s onwards, a dramatic change began to take place in many of those « cités ». They had been initially designed for medium-income families of industrial and clerical workers and many of them thought this habitat was modern and desirable. Beginning in the late 60s, changes in government policies lead regular workers to leave social housing for home ownership, deindustrialization trapped those who staid in « cités » which had been built for providing labour force to the factories nearby, and poor families of new immigrants poured in. Many of the « cités » became refuges for the growing number of pauperized families, and loci of social stigma.

The word « cité » was first used to refer to social housing developments as early as 1950, in the architecture and planning literature, along with « groupe d'habitation » (see No 41 & 42). « Ensemble d'habitation » and « grand ensemble » were soon added to this vocabulary – which was widely used by planners, administrators, social scientists, politicians and the press in the period of mass production of housing which spanned from 1953 to 1974. But most of those words remained enclosed in the technical vocabulary they belonged to, whereas « cité » made its way into common language. The reason is that « cité » entered in combination with some other word to make place-names all over the country : « la Cité des 4000 », « la Cité des Poètes », « la Cité des Bleuets » (for details see No 43)

Planners of social housing rather early used « cité », or « cité nouvelle » to name the modern and reformed habitat they were devising for the industrial and clerical workers of urban France (see No 44). « La Cité de la Muette » built by Lods and Prouvé at Drancy in 1931 or « la Cité radieuse » by Le Corbusier in Marseilles in 1949 are symptomatic. The word « cité » indeed connoted two aspects that modernist architects and housing reformers wanted to claim for their first large-scale developments : first, the notion of a self-contained space or community – different and separated from the rest of the urban periphery where they were to be located – second, some notion of urbanism or urbanity of a higher grade. Both connotations were already associated with « cité-jardin » which had been chosen to translate « garden city » into French in 1903.

It is not always meaningful to go back to a remote past in order to describe the present meanings of words. More often than not, it is rather misleading : etymological fantasies are analytical dead-ends, for the very simple reason that old meanings do not travel through time together with phonemes if no one makes them to do so.

In this case, however, I think the long history of « cité » is relevant, because it helps make sense of the emphatic dimension that the word can take in some contexts today. Centuries ago, « cité » was the vulgar word for « civitas » and « civitas » denoted a superior status in the hierarchy of roman then mediaeval towns ; since then « cité » was an emphatic synonym for the more mundane « ville ». « Civitas Dei » by Augustine was translated « La Cité de Dieu » as early as the 16th c. More technically, in Roman Gaul as well as in Britain, « civitates » were the places where bishops of the Constantine empire had their sees – so were « cités » and « cities » in medieval times.

Urban settlements were often made of separate parts that were ruled by different lords and laws. With the urban renaissance after A.D. 1000, new merchant settlements developed outside the walls of the bishop's « cité » – after a while the word « cité » began to refer to one part only of a larger town : the jurisdiction of the bishop, as opposed to other parts ruled by secular lords, or a municipality (see Froissard 14th c. No 46), later it came to mean simply the older part of a town (see l'Encyclopédie No 47). Still in the 18th c. it was told (No 48) : « À Paris, il y a ville, cité et université ».

At that point in time « cité » had two meanings : 1/ it referred to any « ville » that could be distinguished by its religious status, its real or imaginary past, its antique foundation or present « éclat » ; or 2/ it referred to the older part of the town where the cathedral was located. The emphatic meaning of « cité » could be taken more metaphorically and

lead to two other uses : in a time when Antiquity was worshipped, « cité » could sometimes mean the citizens themselves as being ruled by the same law, the « res publica », the body politic (see Académie française just after the Revolution No 49) ; it could also mean an ideal or godly community, the heavenly Jerusalem, the « City of God ».

The French Revolution did not alter this much : it abolished differences of status between towns by dividing the territory in « communes » with equal rights (1791) ; it also abolished any difference in the administrative status of the various parts of the same town. The same law was in force everywhere, political space was homogeneous – and « cité » was definitely cut from any practical meaning. But the coming commercial 19th century was about to invent a new one.

When the Revolutionary cycle came to an end and real estate resumed in the 1820s and 30s, a new meaning was attached to « cité ». It was quite matter-of-fact, and indirectly led to the present major usage. « Cité » was chosen by land developers to refer to a street or set of streets that they laid out on an urban lot and sold piecemeal to builders. Basically it was the same urban process than in London when the first « squares » were developed in the West End around 1630. Morphology was different indeed, but « cité » as well as « square » referred to a housing development taken as a whole, and to the new street or streets in it. One would dwell in the fashionable addresses (No 50) : « Cité d'Antin », « Cité Trévisé » or « Cité Bergère », off the « Grands Boulevards » – in the Paris of Balzac, Beaudelaire and the « flaneur ». Hence the addition Littré gave to the meanings of « cité » in his 1863 dictionary (No 51): « Ensemble de maisons qui, dans une grande ville, se tiennent et ont quelques règles spéciales et une sorte d'association. ». Since then « cité » can refer to a housing development and the attached place-name and street.

But the bad news came rather quickly. Some social reformers had the idea of using the same word « cité » to refer to the « cités ouvrières » they dreamt to build for housing and reforming industrial workers. The Continental upheaval of 1848 gave momentum to this literature (No 52 to 54). In 1849, the second edition of a book by Charles Fourier was published with the title « Les cités ouvrières », the following year the good Dr Villermé published a reform programme entitled « Sur les cités ouvrières ». Some philanthropists even built a few model « cités ouvrières » in Paris – like the « Cité Napoléon » in the 9th arrondissement of the capital (1849-53). Pitifully, the word was not only used by the good guys, but also by the bad ones : slum landlords built « cités », some of them real big, piling up hundreds of jerry built dwellings along narrow streets, like (No 55) the infamous « Cité Doré » (ca. 1859) or « Cité Jeanne d'Arc » (1869-72). The use of « cité »

vastly expanded : in 1856, the « Nouveau plan de Paris » published by Hachette, listed 18 « cités » (and 143 « passages »). In another edition eight years later (1864) there were 42 « cités ».

Slum or model housing, it did not quite matter from the viewpoint of developers who were targeting the upper parts of the housing market : « cité », which they had used for promoting symbolic distinction in the 1830s, had been attached to housing for the workers from the late 40s on : the word was popularised and devalorised. New words had to be put into use to mark the distinctiveness of the housing developments the bourgeoisie of the « Imperial feast » would buy. Those new words were mainly « villa » and, less often, « square » (which had been borrowed around 1850 from England at the same time as « parc » – but for naming a small urban garden). « Villas » multiplied in the new Paris of the west – until the word spread to land subdivisions of a lower grade, and went into the same devalorisation process as « cité » a few decades before.

The use of « cité » by planners in the 1930s – and at much broader a scale in the 50s and 60s can – be described as a reactivation of the emphatic dimension of « cité ». It was also a time when one built brand new « cités universitaires » and « cités administratives ». The « cités ouvrières » of the mid-19th c. had been clearly forgotten.

It seems to me both ironic and interesting that « cité » has experienced for the second time a process of devalorisation that started in the 1970s with mass unemployment and changes in the population of the « grands ensembles ».

As early as the 60s, in specialized literature the vocabulary began to change : the rather bureaucratic and matter-of-fact « grand ensemble » tended to replace the slightly grandiloquent « cité ». Titles of articles by a well-known sociologist at that time were, for instance, « Les cités nouvelles et leur vie sociale » in 1958 and « Education et vie sociale dans les grands ensembles d'habitation » in 1962. Other bureaucratic niceties were given birth to, like « zone à urbaniser en priorité » in 1957, which was first translated in concrete, then in an acronym : « zup ». « Zup » became a place-name in the same manner as « cité » (No 57) : « la ZUP du Val Fourré ». Some people began to say : « j'habite la zup » ou « la cité », and other people : « ceux de la zup », « ceux des hlm ».

Official vocabulary is today trying to eschew the words of social stigma and tries to symbolically rehabilitate people and places. « Quartier », of course, was chosen for that reason, with the success I described earlier. Some years ago, « Zup » has been banished from official vocabulary – but in many places local people stick to it. This is a nice

example of a bureaucratic invention which has been successful in common language longer than the bureaucrats would have wished. Another attempt to salvation is calling « résidence » places that were known before as « cités ». « Résidence » is an interesting word private developers would use in the period (the 1950s and 60s) when many of them built roughly the same kind of housing than public bodies (with public finance and at controlled prices). They picked « résidence » as a marker of distinction from public housing : on one side of the road there was « la Résidence des Roses » and on the other « la Cité des Tulipes ». The structures were rather similar, but there was some false marble in the hall of the « résidence ». But I would guess that recycling « résidence » for rehabilitating « cités » dooms the word to a quick devalorisation... If the social order is to hold, it needs to be supported by a symbolic order. But symbols cannot be created by mere marketing practices.