

Language and Society

Essay

By Sophie Vericel

Topic: Analysis of a French music-band's vocalist's pronunciation: a step towards a sub-cultural phenomenon.

Intégration? Quelle intégration? Est-ce qu'on peut demander à quelqu'un qui est chez soi de s'intégrer?
Mustapha Amokane¹

Toulouse. A large city in the South of France, which used to be the heart of Occitanan regional culture and is known as well to be the birthplace of the now famous music band: Zebda².

The point of this essay is to demonstrate that there is a correlation between Zebda's pronunciation in their songs and their political commitment. Following the work of Peter Trudgill about the variation in pronunciation in British pop singers, and more widely the work of W. Labov, I will show how the pronunciation of the vocalist of Zebda reflects the cultural and political goals of the band: the creation of a new multicultural subculture which rests on the syncretism between the values of the North (European culture) and the values of the South (Mediterranean/Arabic culture). I am aware of the limitations of my analysis, which can only be a hypothesis since it is based on so few materials: extracts of songs of Zebda from their last album "Essence ordinaire", that I will contrast with extracts of one of their interviews to a local radio station in Toulouse. Nevertheless, I do think that this phenomenon is becoming a subculture and could be identified in the pronunciation of many current music bands from the South of France that share the same characteristics³. The current essay tries only to show its relevance.

1- Corpus

¹ Integration? Which integration are you talking about? How could you ask to someone who is at home, in his country, to get integrated?

² Zebda is a band of 7 musicians. The songs I have chosen to analyse as well as the extracts of the interview are from the main singer, Mustapha Amokrane. I chose him precisely because his accent is the strongest but I think the conclusions I reached could be applied to the other singers as well (Hakim Amokrane and Magyd Cherfi) though maybe not so obviously.

In this essay, I will refer to Zebda as an individual: the singer Mustapha Amokrane.

³ Just to name some of them: Mano Negra, Manu Chao, Massilia Sound System, Fabulous Troubadours, Iam.

The analysis of Zebda's song "Oualalaradime" reveals evidence of a pronunciation generally associated with the South of France and which diverges dramatically from the standard pronunciation⁴.

The striking features are the following:

In most of the cases:

a- the three standard nasal sounds are denasalised:

- i. [a] is pronounced [an]
- ii. [o] is pronounced [on]
- iii. [ɛ] is pronounced [ɛn] or [ɛŋ]

b- the open vowels are closed:

- i. [ɔ] is pronounced [o]
- ii. [œ] is pronounced [ø]
- iii. [ɛ] is pronounced [e]

c- the [ʁ] is more systematically realised

If we compare this song to the others in the same album we can find the same features. To give just one example: the famous hit "Tomber la chemise" which came first in the hit parade of summer 1999 and launched their reputation is clearly pronounced [tombɛlaʝoemizoe:] instead of [tobɛlaʝmiz].

The conclusion of this short analysis shows that the singer of Zebda has most of the characteristics of a strong regional southern accent. Despite this, it is not possible to qualify his pronunciation as "Toulousan" since one important characteristic is missing: the rolled [r]. I will discuss this feature later.

If we now compare this pronunciation to the pronunciation in an interview he gave to local radio, some important differences appear.

The main one is that a great majority of nasals are realised (actually only one is clearly not: [putɛn] and yet this word is so archetypical of a southern pronunciation that even non-southern-native speakers pronounce it in this way to imitate a southern accent). The other nasals are either totally realised or partially, but never to the point of "denasalisation" as when he sings.

Another relevant change of pronunciation is the closing of the open vowels:

- the [ɔ] is very softened and much closer to the standard way of pronouncing it, like in [pʁoletɛR]
- the [ø] is oftener realised, like in [savødiR]
- we cannot find any examples of [e] pronounced [ɛ]

However, the two other characteristics of southern accent, i.e. the trend to over-pronounce the [ʁ] and to close the [ɛ] remain.

Thus, we see that some of the patterns of southern pronunciation have disappeared in the speaking act. They are precisely the more conscious characteristics of this pronunciation. For instance, if you ask a northern Frenchman to imitate the southern accent, he would probably do it by denasalising the nasal vowels. On the contrary, the realisation of the mute [ʁ] is something less conscious for non-linguists.

⁴ This analysis is based on the work of Carton, Rossi, Autesserre, Léon (1983) in *Les accents des Français*.

Thus, we can conclude that Zebda, when singing, has deliberately tried to adopt some of the features of a typical southern-French pronunciation. The question now is why do they modify their pronunciation in this way and why is this modification only partial.

2- Context: the centralised French State

Before continuing the analysis of Zebda's songs, I would like to point out some facts that are useful to understand the issue⁵.

a- Paris and regional minorities: the issue of language

When in the beginning of the sixteen century, the King of France Francois I, by the "Ordonnance de Villers-Cotterêts" decided to make French the official language of his Kingdom, instead of Latin, he naturally chose the dialect of the Court, the dialect of Paris: the Francilien (from now on called French). We know how, century after century and until very recently, the central power of Paris has worked in the same direction, trying to standardise communication within the State and eradicate the other languages of France. The Revolution of 1789 (in the person of Abbé Gregoire) was not exempt from this struggle: in order to unify the nation, and have a population with the same linguistic/educational/and political background, French Language was assigned as the only language of the Republic. Later, in the nineteen century, Jules Ferry, founder of the modern public school, contributed largely to the linguistic homogenisation in developing schools all over France where children were taught only in French.

Examples have been numerous all through History. They all contributed to the same goal to such an extent that linguistic unification was dramatic: in many areas of France, local dialects and languages completely disappeared.

Similarly, as French became the only official language, the pronunciation from Paris was asserting itself more and more recognition to such a degree that the Parisian way of pronouncing was considered the only correct way, whereas regional accents (and particularly those from the South) were seen more and more as incorrect, not to say funny and ridiculous.

It is only in the seventies that the process towards unification and standardization of French was contested for the first time. The cultural revolution of 68 initiated an upheaval: through the slogan "vivre et travailler au pays" ([we want to] live and work in our region), regional cultures acquired again a certain status and became the focus of many claims: the right to be different, the right to speak another language, the right to exist in another culture.

But these claims largely remained the expression of a regionalist opinion that Paris never acknowledged. The recent refusal by France to sign the "European Charter of regional and minority languages" is further confirmation of this attitude⁶.

b- Paris and ethnic minorities: the concept of assimilation

⁵ All the following are generally well admitted notions of the relationships between French central State and regional and ethnic minorities. What I have done here is to put both in perspective to understand Zebda claims.

⁶ The 23 of June 1999, the Constitutional Counsel declared the Charter incompatible with the laws of the Republic: a change in Constitution was necessary. J. Chirac rejected the idea of changing the Constitution and therefore France did not ratify the Charter. France therefore still recognizes only one language spoken in the state: French.

In the sixties also, what is known as the Republican Model (i.e. the assimilation of regional and minority cultures into one homogeneous entity) was applied by successive governments to the new populations who were immigrating into France, firstly from southern Europe, later from Northern and West Africa. The idea was that if the goal of assimilation was roughly reached with minority French subcultures, it could be extended to foreign cultures, which were rooting in France. Thus, specific characteristics of these cultures (like religion, way of clothing, way of eating) were systematically erased, minimised or diluted in the global French cultural system. So when in the eighties, the first “Marche des Beurs”⁷ took place, the surprise was general: who were they? Who were these teenagers claiming that, although part of the French nation, they did not want to be assimilated but wanted recognition of their specific identity? Since then, the rise of Le Pen, the general question of “banlieues” and the global awareness of second-generation issues have largely contributed to highlighting the question. Although Paris continued to deny the existence of any particular groups within the State, claims for recognition of ethnic minorities grew.

Thus, there is undoubtedly a form of convergence between the ethnic and the regional claims: the attitude of governments towards them (denial of their existence) and the reaction that this provoked (affirmation of differences).

3- Analysis of socio-linguistic aspects: Zebda

The music band Zebda has been, from the beginning, mainly a group of friends who used to live as children, in one of the northern suburbs of Toulouse. They became members of a non-profit-making organization, Tactikollectif, which was active in their district. The aims of Tactikollectif were to create solidarity and equality, to fight racism and sexism, through shared cultural activities. Keen on music, they decided to found their band, Zebda, while continuing to participate actively in the organization. The band and the social organization have always been correlated. Actually, some of the funds earned by the band are a means to provide “subsidies” for the organization. During the last parliamentary elections in May 2002, they presented together a left-wing list called “les Motivé-e-s” which received 12% of voters’ ballots. Zebda is thus a very committed music band, known as being involved in loosely second-generation issues. They work for a multicultural society, based on tolerance and equality.

But, although the majority of them belong to the “second generation”, their pronunciation in the songs- and especially the one of the person they chose to be their principal singer – reflects a deep-rooted southern French accent. That means that they do not have any trace of their mother tongue (Arabic) and it would be impossible to recognize their ethnic origin when listening to them. The main characteristic of their accent is that it is an accent from the South of France: at first hearing, anyone would say that they have the accent of the region they belong to, the regional accent of Toulouse.

⁷ Demonstrations in 1982, 1985 and 1986, from Marseille to Paris, which claimed specific recognition of the identity and problems of second-generation immigrants.

Per se, of course, it is not completely incoherent: they do come from Toulouse. But two important questions remain: why, then, do they tend to over pronounce it when they sing, as the linguistic analysis shows, and why do they not adopt every feature of Toulousan accent, and especially this special [r]?

One explanation could be found in the accommodation theory⁸. Following the path of Peter Trudgill in his article about British Pop-singers, the theory could be used to explain variations in Zebda's pronunciation. Peter Trudgill rejects the theory as not relevant for British pop singers, but, in the case of Zebda, to a certain extent, it works: originally, Zebda used to play in their own environment and since the regional identity has always been strong in Toulouse, they could deliberately have tried to identify with their audience in order to create the closeness and intimacy which are characteristic of their style: they always have been a "group of pals who play for their pals". Nevertheless, things have changed now: their reputation goes far beyond Toulouse area, as far as Paris, and they played all over France. Yet, they still have the same accent.

Obviously another explanation could be that their so typical accent is part of their success – and now of their identity as a band – so they cannot change it. Their commercial success depends on this public image that they have created. But it is clearly not sufficient since the question remains of why they chose especially to have this public image and not another.

Conversely to Peter Trudgill, Le Page's theory of linguistic behaviour does not offer total satisfaction. In the case of Zebda, there is no musical group with which they could wish to identify. Their accent is from the south; there is however no folkloric group from the south that could be their model. They are by no means Occitan folklorists. On the other hand, the more obvious influence in their music comes from Arab music (raï and traditional music). But their pronunciation when they sing does not display any of the features of Arabic accent:

- the [e] and the [y] are not pronounced as [i]
- the [v] is not pronounced as [b]
- and, above all, the sound [R] which is rolled [r] in Arabic and is the most striking feature of this language is not pronounced in this way by Zebda, although it is also a characteristic of Toulousan accent.

So what could be the explanation for this pronunciation? I argue that their pronunciation is a positive assertion of their conflictive and multiple identities. Zebda, as well as the other bands that follow the same path, are building up a new cross language, which lies in the intersection of standard French culture and Arabic culture. Being torn between two cultures, two languages, two identities, and because it was not possible to identify with only one of them, they have unconsciously rejected their original double identity, as their pronunciation shows.

On one side, they have rejected Arabic language and erased the most striking feature of this language: the rolled [r]. On the other side, they have rejected the dominant French language (the Parisian French) by excessively adopting the marks of the minority-southern-French accent.

⁸ From Giles, H. and Smith, P. (1979), 'Accommodation Theory: optimal levels of convergence'.

But in so doing, they have created a new language at the cross between the two: a southern plural regional identity, half way between the northern norms from Paris and the southern norms from the other side of the Mediterranean Sea.

The choice of a regional allegiance is not accidental: it was able to fulfil the conditions for a new identity basis: the minority regional culture and the minority Arabic culture converge in the same rejection of the mainstream Parisian culture, as I have demonstrated above.

Besides, both cultural and linguistic features of southern France are closer to Arabic, which allows easier connexions between both cultures (connected in what is generally called a Mediterranean culture).

This new identity nonetheless is not a living-in-the-past attitude: although it has its roots in regional claims from the seventies, it is original because it combines several influences. This culture is a creation of something new, modern because multicultural. It looks towards the future and answers the question of how to build up a society with the current multi-ethnicity factors.

Multicultural aspects are the following:

- Beside what I have already noted in relation to their language, they use several foreign languages: mainly Arabic (like the title of the song “Oulalaradime”) but also English or Gypsy words.
The name of the band itself stems from a very interesting mixture of French and Arabic culture: Zebda means “butter” (“beurre” [boeR] in French) in Arabic. But “beur” [boeR] is in French- and in France only- the name invented by the second generation to call themselves. So “Zebda” is an Arabic word referring to a French reality.
- The music provides a mixture of many influences: rock, reggae, raï, funk, rap and traditional Arab music.
- Members of the band come from various origins: even if they all are from and have grown up in Toulouse, their parents come from Algeria, Morocco, Marseille, Toulouse and even Reims.

Multicultural aspects are thus integrated in a coherent set that tends to the same goal: hence, it is possible to talk about a new sub-cultural phenomenon. It would of course be necessary to confirm it by an extended analysis of speakers sharing the same characteristics, in other music bands but as well in their audience. But, as this essay demonstrates it, Zebda offer a possible answer to the main question posed by immigration in Europe: how to build a space to live together.

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2- Radio Programme

Les interviews du mouv' (16th June, 2000), Le Mouv' -RFI Radio.

3- Web side

www.zebda.fr

www.motive-e-s.org

www.tactikollectif.org

www.rfimusique.com

Annexe 2:
An interview of Zebda on Le Mouv'- RFI
(extract)

Transcription:

Standard pronunciation of the extract above: *Zebda's pronunciation of the extract above:*