

FRENCH Levels I-III

‘What Rhymes With Purell?’ Franglais Rappers Push Language Boundaries in Quebec – *New York Times* April 10th, 2020 by Dan Bilefsky



Members of the **Franglais** rap group Dead Obies, in Montreal.

From left: Pierre Savu-Massé, a.k.a. Ogee Rodman; Jonathan Quirion, a.k.a. Joe Rocca; Charles-André Vincelette, a.k.a. 20some; Gregory Beaudin, a.k.a. Snail Kid; and Vincent Banville, a.k.a. Vince Carter. Credit...Nasuna Stuart-Ulin for The New York Times

Lesson Overview:

In this lesson, students **will read a current news article** to learn about tensions around bilingual hip-hop music in Montreal. Then, they will consider the multiple points of view presented in the article, or analyze a bilingual song in a language they know or are learning.

Rappers in Montreal, Quebec are playing with the use of language in the music they are creating; however, bilingual wordplay is not embraced by all people in Quebec. Some Quebecois think it is more important to preserve the French language and fear that Franglais, or “Frenghish,” could threaten that.

Warm Up: *all responses should be written on your own paper*

1. Is there an official language in your country?
2. If not, such as in the United States, what are the dominant languages in your neighborhood or community?
3. Do you ever hear people around you, or the government, talk about the importance of preserving language?

Watch this video of teens talking about their experiences growing up multilingual in Quebec. The video references Quebec’s Bill 101, which officially made French the language of the government, business and the courts, throughout the province.

Video link here! – Or, check it out on Youtube at <https://youtu.be/StGovX4ua38>

It’s okay if you don’t have access to video, just skip this and read the article.

4. What did you find interesting or surprising in what the teenagers in the video shared?
5. Do you relate to any of their experiences with preserving a language at home, or learning a new language at school?

The article below focuses on rap, but it also connects more broadly to the importance of French language preservation in Quebec. As you read the article, keep these teenagers' experiences in mind and see if anything they talked about resonates with themes discussed in the article.

****Questions for Writing and Discussion are at the end of the article****

They should be completed on your own paper

‘What Rhymes With Purell?’ Franglais Rappers Push Language Boundaries in Quebec – *New York Times* April 10th, 2020 by Dan Bilefsky

MONTREAL — In the bunkerlike, dimly lit basement recording studio in Montreal, the Quebec rapper [Snail Kid](#) pondered a question befitting these pandemic times: What word rhymes with Purell?

Mulling how to fit the hand sanitizer into his latest rap lyric, he considered the English words “well,” “smell” and “toaster strudel” before toying with the French words “pluriel” and “ruelle.”

Then, Snail Kid, 30, a member of the popular Quebec hip-hop group [Dead Obies](#) began to rap:

Le monde ici est cruel On n'est plus well (The world here is cruel. We are no longer well.)

“Now everyone is going to be competing to find the best rhyme for ‘quarantine’ or ‘corona,’” mused Snail Kid, whose real name is Gregory Beaudin. Mr. Beaudin grew up speaking the native English of his Jamaican-born father, a reggae singer, as well as the French of his Montreal-born mother, a French teacher.

The bilingual wordplay in the cavernous recording studio reflected how the coronavirus has changed not only how we live, but popular culture. It was also notable for another reason particular to [Montreal](#): The group was rapping in Franglais or “Frenghish,” mixing English and French with artistic abandon that irks some purists.

The Dead Obies are part of a new generation of young Quebec hip-hop artists who meld the language of Shakespeare and Voltaire with the urban poetry of Montreal’s street life and the bling-bling, drug-fueled themes of some American hip-hop.

Other artists of this generation are Loud and FouKi. To their legions of fans, the groups give voice to the bilingual vernacular of a multicultural city, marinated by its past French and British rulers, the forces of globalization and successive waves of immigration.

“Franglais rappers reflect that the younger generation in Quebec don’t care about old orthodoxies and are open to the world,” said [Sugar Sammy](#), a Quebec comedian with Punjabi roots who became a global sensation after pioneering a bilingual comedy show.

But they have also spawned a backlash in Quebec, a majority French-speaking province, where critics have castigated them as self-colonizers who are “creolizing” the French language and threatening its future.

And they have lost out on lucrative federal government funding for Francophone artists because their content wasn't French enough.

[Mathieu Bock-Côté](#), a sociologist and influential columnist at [Le Journal de Montréal](#), said Franglais rappers were a worrying sign that the younger generation in Quebec had lost sight of the fragility of the French language in the city and were turning to English as a default to show emotion and express themselves.



“Without French,
Montreal would be
Pittsburgh”

“Franglais is a slippery slope toward Anglicization,” he said. “These bourgeois-bohemian adolescents who think speaking English or Franglais will make Montreal into a New York are deluded because it is the French language that gives the city its cachet.”

“Without French, Montreal would be Pittsburgh,” he added.

Questions of language are inextricably bound up with identity in Quebec, a province of about 8.5 million people where the British minority exerted its language and culture after Quebec was ceded to Britain in 1763 following [France's defeat](#) in the Seven Years' War.

French-speakers of a certain age can still recall being admonished by members of the Anglophone minority at factories to “speak white,” or speak English.

Today, language laws require that French be the official language of government, business and the courts.

Concerned that the Franglais greeting of “[Bonjour-hi](#)” was becoming too ubiquitous in Montreal shops and restaurants, the Quebec government in late 2017 passed a nonbinding resolution calling for shopkeepers to say only “Bonjour” instead.

[A French citizen](#) was recently denied a certificate she needed to settle permanently in Quebec. Her offense? Writing a chapter of her doctoral thesis in English rather than in French. After an outcry, the right-leaning Quebec government granted her the document.

Yet in recent years, [Quebec's influential language watchdog](#) has shown some flexibility, alluding to the [evolving nature](#) of language.

It ruled that using “[grilled-cheese](#)” on menus instead of the more long-winded “sandwich au fromage fondant” would not breach Quebec's language rules, while [cocktail](#), and [haggis](#) were also deemed acceptable in French.

At the same time, the watchdog has been successful at encouraging Quebecers to say “courriel” instead of the pervasive English word “email” used by many in France.

Mr. Beaudin, who grew up in Hochelaga-Maisonneuve, a working-class neighborhood in the eastern part of Montreal, said the Dead Obies hadn’t set out to make a political statement. Rather, they were merely mimicking the language and sounds of Québécois French, where words and expressions like “c’est le fun” (it’s fun) and “mon chum” (my boyfriend) were commonplace.

Brought up on English video games and Facebook, he said he and his friends didn’t have neuroses about language. Moreover, he argued, a society that attacked its artists was discriminatory, insecure and misguided.

“You can be more creative when you are rapping in two languages,” he added.

To make his point, he rapped a few lines from a Dead Obies song that switches mid-sentence from French to English:

Je te jure que Billie Jean is not my lover Nope, nope

C’est juste une fille que je meet sur dans le after hours

(I swear to you that Billie Jean is not my lover. Nope, nope. It’s just a girl I meet at the after-hours.)

As a biracial teenager in Montreal, Mr. Beaudin said he had been attracted to rappers like [Eminem](#) and [Jay-Z](#) and had turned to Franglais rap for cultural affirmation. Rapping in two languages spliced with street slang was also a way to revolt against a Québécois cultural elite dominated by white Francophone artists.

But he said rapping in Franglais has come at a heavy cost. The group [lost subsidies](#) of about \$18,000 on their second album from a national government fund for Francophone artists because it was 55 percent French and 45 percent English.

The funding was predicated on an album having at least 70 percent French content.

The equivalent Anglophone fund stipulated that French content on an album be no more than 50 percent, making them ineligible for that, too.

Now we count how many words we say in French or in English,” he said. “In a small domestic market like Quebec, artists need subsidies to survive.”

[Nicolas Ouellet](#), host of a popular music show on [Radio-Canada](#), Canada’s leading French-language radio station, said Franglais rappers were largely omitted from commercial radio stations and sneered at for not being part of Quebec’s “folklore.”

But, he said, “rather than bastardizing Québécois French, they are acting as a bridge between Quebec and the rest of North America.”

Montreal has become among the most bilingual cities in North America, alongside Miami and Los Angeles. According to [2016 national census figures](#), about 18 percent of Canadians speak both English and French, with Quebec driving the bilingualism.

While some guardians of the French language fear creeping bilingualism, the resistance to Franglais rap is more than just a question of language.

[FouKi](#), a popular Quebec rapper whose real name is Léo Fougères, observed that Franglais rapping didn't just irritate those determined to preserve French.

“My father will hear my raps and say to me, ‘Isn't there a word for that in French?’” he said. “But other older people say to me, I don't understand anything you say.”

Questions for Writing and Discussion

[After reading the article](#), answer the following questions on your own paper.

1. What are the layers of culture that young Quebec hip-hop artists, like Dead Obies, are playing with and exploring in their music?
2. Why are some in Quebec critical of the music that the Dead Obies, and other younger artists, are creating?
3. What is your reaction to what Mathieu Bock-Côté, a sociologist and columnist, said about Franglais: “Without French, Montreal would be Pittsburgh”?
4. Do you believe the preservation of language is “fragile,” as Mr. Bock-Coté said?
5. The author of the article, Dan Bilefsky, highlighted some of Quebec's history and recent language-related incidents. How does that information change or enhance your understanding of the dynamics around language that are discussed throughout the article?
6. How does Gregory Beaudin, a member of the Dead Obies, describe his process of using both French and English in the songs he writes? How does he talk about identity and discrimination in relation to music and some of the criticism that he and the Dead Obies have faced?
7. What have the financial implications been of the Dead Obies rapping in Franglais?

Going Further

Option 1: Analyze Multiple Points of View

The featured article presented the opinions and perspectives of artists, journalists and everyday people. Choose four of those perspectives to analyze using the [Multiple Points of View worksheet](#) attached.

If you have more time, you can write in greater detail about the different perspectives in the article, and then share your own. What is your opinion about bilingual songs, such as the ones featured in the article? Should the focus of art in Quebec be on preserving the French language, or should there be space for multilingual lyrics and creations? Respond to some of the perspectives from the article as you make your point.

Option 2: Analyze a Bilingual Song

What is your experience with multilingual music? Do you listen to any artists who sing or rap in more than one language? How important is it that you are able to understand both languages?

If you are in a class in which you are learning a new language, choose a bilingual song that features either two languages you know, or one language you know well and a second that you are learning.

For example, if you are learning French, you could choose to listen to any of the artists mentioned in the article, such as the Dead Obies, Loud and FouKi, or you could listen to [Christine and the Queens](#). If you're looking for a song in Spanish and English, you could choose "[I Like It](#)" by Cardi B, Bad Bunny & J Balvin or "[Mi Gente](#)" by J Balvin, Willy William featuring Beyoncé. The artist [Manu Chao](#) writes songs in English, French, Spanish, Portuguese and many more languages.

Once you have selected a song, listen three times and follow these instructions to guide your listening experience:

1. As you listen for the first time, appreciate the song as a whole. What do you notice about the rhythm, tempo and lyrics? Are there any words, lyrics or parts of the song that stand out to you?
2. The second time you listen, check for comprehension and pause the song when you do not understand a word. If you need assistance, you can see if the lyrics are available online, or you can sound out the word to the best of your ability.
3. After your third listen, reflect on the overall structure and meaning of the song. Think specifically about the role that language played in the song. Were you distracted by the multiple languages that were used in the song? What was added to the song by there being a second language? Did you feel that the second language took away from the meaning or value of the song in anyway? How might it feel to hear the song if you only spoke one of the two languages?

Be Safe, Be Well
YOU ARE MISSED