

RACIAL SLURS IN DICTIONARIES

Summary

This paper aims to identify racial slurs and pejorative words expressed by abusive ethnic designations in the French language. Our objective is to question these nomenclatures of people and to examine them with their quotations. Racism per se will not be addressed but rather the degrading linguistic expressions and terms. Dealing with racist vocabulary could lead its authors into becoming language legislators, a role that we avoid in order to concentrate on the pertinence or irrelevance of some forty racist terms and expressions. We will point them out and analyse them in *Le Petit Robert* and *Le Petit Larousse*.

Defining racial slurs in dictionaries such as *Le Petit Robert* and *Le Petit Larousse*, two dictionaries frequently consulted by readers, is relevant for several linguists and lexicographers, since according to them learners of French as a second or foreign language should be aware of their impact.

The result of our search concludes that these racist terms are found in different forms and structures. The above-mentioned dictionaries, although they mostly agree on the definitions, are lacking consistency in the labelling of these terms. Uniformity in the “chronological-register-notational” marking would be most beneficial for dictionary users.

Pertinence or irrelevance of racial insults

Are racial slurs pertinent in a dictionary? Isn't any pejorative word or expression, particularly when it is using an ethnic designation, derogatory? Our intention is not to treat the global problem of racism, but only the linguistic words and expressions referring negatively to nomenclature of people. Far from wanting to be the language police raising the “politically correct” flag, we are inquiring into the existence of some forty racist ethnic designations, particularly in two well known dictionaries: *Le Petit Robert* (PR) and *Le Petit Larousse* (PL).

We will discuss to what extent those words and expressions are pertinent or not pertinent, particularly for foreigners or second language learners. Should their existence offend anybody since lexicographers believe they innocently describe the meaning without hateful propaganda?

Terminology

The word *pejorative*, will be used to indicate a depreciation of the designated person or ethnic group. Also, one should note the distinction that *Petit Robert* and *Petit Larousse* make between the labels "obsolete" (*vieilli*) and "ancient" (*vieux*) that we will be using. Thus, "obsolete" is referring to a word, a meaning or an expression that is understandable nowadays, but is not at all naturally used in spoken language. "Ancient" is defined as a word, a meaning or an ancient language use that is incomprehensible or less comprehensible nowadays and never used, unless for some stylistic reason.

(*PL-*) or (*PR-*) indicate that neither *Petit Larousse* nor *Petit Robert* give any pejorative connotation or mention a pejorative racial word in their nomenclature.

Methodology

The reader can find several dictionaries about insults in French but, to our knowledge, no book about racist denominations or pejorative expressions with racist connotations.

Our literature review and search of keywords like "racism, insults, invective, offensive language..." has lead us to several titles but almost nothing related to our above-mentioned objective. Thus, from several hundred ethnic designations of *Petit Robert* dictionary, we have analysed each definition and identified only forty that are per se considered offensive by their denomination. We have compared those denominations between *Petit Robert 1993* (PR) and *Nouveau Petit Robert de la langue française 2007* and *Petit Larousse 1999* (PL). Also, we have consulted *Trésor de la langue française 2004* (TLF), less referred to by the average reader, to extract more explicit details.

Incursion in the universe of racism

Before presenting racial denominations, we believe it plausible to make a brief incursion into the racism space in order to understand better the opponents' position (our position) against verbal insults.

Salmon (1980, p.172) informs us that racism is related to "prejudice...lack of education, narrow- mindedness, social isolation accompanied by stereotypes, that is simplified generalisation that does not relate to objective facts. For instance, for the White of South Africa, the Black is rough, stupid, immoral, happy, generous and faithful".

Taguieff (1991, p.45) underlines the facts that "[...] the most violent incitement to hatred, rejection, expulsion, etc., appear like logical and legitimate conclusions of a patriotic lead and assertion of a republican tradition ...". These words apply to several derogatory denominations during the Second world war where German soldiers were referred to as "frisé, fridolin...". Also, during the American-Vietnam war, "Viet" was a racist insult that was used to identify Vietnamese soldiers. We believe that the general intention of dictionaries is not to nourish racial hatred or fuel racial clashes but to define the use of words as found in newspapers, journals, novels...

From another perspective, Schapira (1999, p.1) notices that there are expressions that "[...] we use without thinking about their real meaning because language has solidified them once and for all and presented them to us as such with the lexicon. Schapira states that there are linguistic stereotypes that shape the mind consciously or uncounsciously and become part of everyday use [...] That is the case with the well known French expression "*saoul comme un Polonais*", literally translated as "Drunk like a Polish/Pole/Polack" (drunk as a lord).

Identification of historical and contemporary racist expressions and pejorative ethnic denominations

In our analysis, we have noticed that some derogatory, racist expressions or words are not present in PR and PL. In fact, some ethnic denominations (not all of them) are found in only one dictionary or both dictionaries. When a racist word or expression is absent from a dictionary, we mention it by (PR-) or (PL-).

The words and expressions with their negative connotations that will be addressed are:

1. **Alexandrin** (from Alexandria): in the expression: "Les discussions alexandrines" = excessive discussions. (PL-).
2. **Algonquin**: ignoring good breeding (as translated in Harrap's Shorter Dictionary 1982). (PL-/PR-).
3. **Amerloque**, Amerlo, Amerlot (also Ricain): American, Yank (Harrap's). Yankee (Robert&Collins).
4. **Apache**: wrongdoer, hooligan (Harrap's). Ruffian, tough. "Il a une allure apache" = he has a tough or a vicious look about him (Robert&Collins Senior 1993).
5. **Asiate**: Asian. Only the adjective "asiate" is pejorative or ironic in PR, while it is considered a racial insult in PL.
6. **Basque**: in the expression: "to murder the French language" which in French is literally "to speak French like a Spanish cow").
7. **Béotien**: refers to an individual lacking intellectual finesse. Also the expression "être béotien en..." = to be Boeotian in... = to be ignorant in...
8. **Bicot/Bic.**: designates a male native from North Africa. (PL-) = Arab, wog (Harrap's + Robert&Collins).

9. **Bohémien** (Bohemian): also Rom, Romanichel (= gipsy (Robert&Collins), gipsy, romany, vagrant (Harrap's), romano = gippo (Robert&Collins).
10. **Bougnoul**: denomination given by white people to black natives of Senegal (PR). Nigger, wog (Arab), fucking or bloody Arab (Robert&Collins). **(PL-)**.
11. **Byzantin**: in the expression "*discussions byzantines*" = ill-timed, futile, pointless discussions (Harrap's).
12. **Chinetoque**: Chink (Harrap's + Robert&Collins). **Chinois**: complicated, over-elaborate (Harrap's). Pernickety, fussy, hair-splitter (Robert&Collins). Also the expression: "c'est du chinois" (in French literally: this is Chinese to me); English uses "It's all Greek to me"; chinoiserie = unnecessary complication.
13. **Chleuh** ou **Schleu**: German, Jerry (1939-1945) (Harrap's), Boche (Robert&Collins).
Other pejorative synonyms: **Fridolin** = German, Kraut, Jerry (Harrap's + Robert&Collins), **Fritz**: Kraut, Jerry (Robert&Collins), German soldier, Jerry (Harrap's). **Frisé**. **(PL-)**: Fritz, Kraut, Jerry.
14. **Crouille, crouillat**: wog, North African (Robert&Collins). **(PL-)**.
15. **Gascon**: in the expressions "offre de Gascon" = hollow promise (Harrap's), "promesse de Gascon" = empty or vain promise. French adds the meaning of a bragging or boastful person. **(PL-)**.
16. **Huron**: rude or coarse person, unrefined, lout, boor, yob.
17. **Jaune**: Chink, Jap, Nip, the yellow races (in plural), blackleg, scab (Robert&Collins).
18. **Juif**: Jew. French adds the meaning of money lender, grasping, greedy. **(PL-)**.
Also **Youpin** = Yid (Robert&Collins). Yid, sheeny, Jew (Harrap's). **(PL-)**.
19. **Kroumir**: inhabitants at the border of Alger and Tunis historically known as plunderers and looters. French adds the meaning of despicable or contemptible person.
20. Un **Lesbien**, une **Lesbienne**: from Lesbos, island of Aegean Sea. Lesbian (in French).

21. **Macaroni:** Italian, wop (Harrap's) + Eyeti(e), wop (Robert&Collins). Also **Rital:** Eyeti(e), wop (Robert&Collins). **(PL-)**.
22. **Malabar:** Malabar Coast in India. Hefty fellow (Robert&Collins). In French, PR adds the meaning of real rogue, PL refers to it as a very strong man!
23. **Melon** (water melon): designates a male native from North Africa, Moroccan . **(PL-)**.
24. **Métèque:** a foreigner living in France whose behaviour is considered. Metic, foreigner, dago, wog (Harrap's). Metic, wog, wop. (Robert&Collins).
25. **Mongol:** Mongol, Mongolian, and/or a person with Down's syndrome. French adds the meaning of "stupid person". **(PL-)**.
26. **Moricaud:** Maure, also refers to dark-skinned. Darkie, wog (Robert&Collins). Black, nigger (Harrap's).
27. **Munichois:** native or inhabitant of Munich. Also designates those who were in favour of the Munich agreement of 1938, and by extension, those who surrendered. **(PL)**.
28. **Nègre:** negro, negress, black. Beside this pejorative words, are other degrading expressions like "*parler petit-nègre*" (literally to speak small-nigger) = to speak pidgin, "*travailler comme un nègre*" = to work like a slave or a nigger, "*nègre en chemise*" (literally a nigger with a shirt) = chocolate and cream dessert, "*tête-de-nègre*" (literally head of a nigger) = a dessert in French. PR specifies that this dessert is named so by comparison to a nigger head!
29. **Paysan du Danube:** plain speaker, boor (Harrap's). **(PL-)**.
30. **Polaque, Polack:** beside the historical reference to mercenary riders working for France in the 17th and 18th century, the French expression in the PR (1993, 2007) is: "Il était soûl comme un cochon, comme une grive, comme un âne, comme un Polonais, comme une bourrique" = He was drunk like a lord (literally in French like a Polack, like a pig...). **(PL-)**.

31. **Portugais** (Portuguese): in the expression "avoir les portugaises ensablées" = to be a real cloth-ears, to be as deaf as a post (Robert&Collins).
32. **Raton** (young rat): pejorative term applied to North Africans in France.
33. **Normand** (Norman): in the expression "réponse de Normand" = evasive, non-committal, equivocal answer (Harrap's + Robert & Collins).
34. **Rosbif** (roast beef): limey (Robert & Collins). **(PL-)**.
35. **Samaritain** (Samaritan): sarcastic in the French expression "*faire le bon Samaritain*" (literally to act like a good Samaritan) means to be helpful, to be ready to sacrifice oneself.
36. **Sioux**: in the expressions "s'avancer avec des ruses de Sioux" = to proceed stealthily (Harrap's) or "avec des ruses de Sioux" = with crafty tactics.
37. **Suisse** (Swiss): in the expression "manger ou boire en suisse" = to drink on one's own (Harrap's), to drink or eat alone (Robert&Collins). French adds "in secret". Also the proverbial phrase "point d'argent, point de Suisse" (literally no money no Swiss) = nothing for nothing.
38. **Turc** (Turkish): in the expressions "tête de Turc" = try-your strength-machine (at fairs), butt, whipping-boy (Harrap's), Whipping boy, Aunt Sally (Robert&Collins); "être la tête de Turc de..." = to be the laughing stock of... French adds the meaning of a cruel man **(PL-)**.
39. **Vendéen** (of the Vendée): refers to the Royalist of the West during the French Revolution towards the end of the 18th century.
40. **Versillais**: inhabitant of Versailles, supporter of Versailles government in 1871... against the Commune of Paris.

41. **Viet** (Vietnamese), the abbreviation is intentional in French and it refers pejoratively to a Vietnamese soldier. A quotation in Petit Robert (1993) was: "Pour lui [...], le bon Viet, c'est le Viet mort" (Courchay) = For him, a good Viet is a dead Viet (**PL-**).
42. **Yankee**: designates the inhabitant of New England, and during the American Civil War, the Northerner by the Southerner (PR). Generally, it refers to an American from the USA (PL).

Observations and analysis

Dictionaries have the task of defining words that are in usage. Although they bring fundamental elements of knowledge, is it necessary to integrate racial insults? Those who are against racial insults wonder whom those derogatory terms and expressions will benefit. Don't they offend the reader or the listener more than they teach him anything? Is their presence to reinforce racial insults?

It is well known that abuse is not a simple blast but a provocation and humiliation of the other through words and expressions loaded with well worn prejudices, hatred, contempt, disrespect, hostility and aggression. In fact, several racial insults are the outcome of ideological attitudes that appeared in a specific historical context, particularly the denomination of Germans by the pejorative names of "Boche (=German, Boche, Kraut), Fridolin (= German, Jerry, Kraut), Frisé, Fritz (= German soldier, Jerry), Chleuh (= German, Jerry 1939-1945 war)...", Vietnamese by the very pejorative "viet" in French (which is not a simple abbreviation), etc. Although in the past, military jargon has been commonly used language, one would wonder how some racial expressions have survived in contemporary dictionaries, while derogatory words like "youtre, gobseck, shylock, gobi" are obsolete and not found in well used dictionaries. In relation to these derogatory ethnic denominations, it happens that some of them trigger controversies, like the article in the newspaper *Le Monde* whose authors, Catinchi et Weil (1995), reported *Le Robert Editions'* decision to withdraw

from the market their edition of *Dictionnaire des synonymes et contraires*. Under one entry "avare" (= avaricious), there were equivalences entertaining anti-Semitic prejudice; also for that reason, the president of the Jewish central consistory of France, Jean Khan, got the right of inspection on the new version of the edition to appear.

Hearing and reading repetitive racial insults and derogatory expressions have become part of the common language of French native speakers (refer to "saoul comme un Polonais" = drunk as a lord, "promesse de Gascon" = "hollow promise"). These expressions are used so well and automatically that they get engraved in our collective memory and are transmitted from generation to generation. Even though this is true – Gross tags them as "set phrases" while Schapira names them "hackneyed phrases" – these expressions have to be understood by both native speakers as well as the foreign language learner. Speakers, readers and writers can't grasp their approximate or specific meanings if dictionaries don't define them with their respective register markings or labels.

If dictionaries give a faithful description of the language of their time, they are usually behind with the usage of certain words, and are forced to integrate new nomenclatures as soon as possible. In relation to quotations, Rey (p. 45) explains how the "traditional" lexicographer comes up against the fact that the majority of examples retained belong to literary texts, for which the solution is to identify massive utterances (newspaper, magazines...) and to give the right place to oral language, which raises difficult problems of choice, gathering and transcription.

Conclusion

The listing of the above French racial slurs is quite exhaustive. The analysis of the above expressions and words related to derogatory and abusive ethnic denominations show that, from one dictionary to the other, there is a consistency in definitions but some variation in the style labels (colloquial, slang, obsolete, ancient). As a matter of fact, while one dictionary

considers that a racist expression is "colloquial **and** pejorative", the other will describe it only as "pejorative" **or** "colloquial", or nothing at all (refer to our symbols PL-, PR-). Moreover, in relation to the chronological indicators, one dictionary would consider a racist word as "obsolete (vieilli)", while the other will characterize it as "ancient (vieux)", or no remark is given. Concerning the style labels, we have exceptionally identified a difference in the degree of the indicator of register with the insult "moricaud" considered as a VERY racist by PR. The comparison of the above nomenclatures between PR (1993 version) and PR (2007 electronic version) reveals that there is not any real modification of quotations, except for one or two, in particular the one related to "viet" that had been slightly sweetened.

We notice also that if some offensive definitions or expressions are mentioned in one dictionary, they are missed out in the other. We believe that in such cases it is less a social concern than a linguistic lacuna.

The racial insults and expressions are presented in a variety of forms that are not all of the same nature:

- Racial or derogatory denominations: amerloque, asiate, bicot, bougnoul, chinetoque, crouille, jaune, macaroni, melon, métèque, moricaud, nègre, peau-rouge, raton, ricain, rital, rosbif;
- Expressions that remind us of cruel historical facts about a nation that are not pertinent nowadays (turc, kroumir);
- Ethnic denominations related to historical insurrections, political inclination or doctrine some time in history: les bolcheviks - les bolchos, les chleuhs and its synonyms, les munichois, les polaques, les vendéens, les versaillais, les viets, les yankees.
- Expressions that reflect a negative complexity or nuisance referred to through ethnic nomenclature: "c'est du chinois" (literally in French: this is Chinese to me) English

uses "It's all Greek to me"; "chinoiserie" = unnecessary complication; "ce sont des discussions alexandrines" (literally Alexandrine discussions to convey the meaning of excessive discussions; "c'est Sioux" = Stealthy;

- Sarcastic expressions such as "to look like a Bohemian", "to act as a good Samaritan", "to murder the French language" (which is literally in French "to speak French like a Spanish cow", "to speak poor or ungrammatical French or to speak pidgin" is literally "to talk small-nigger"), "to work like a slave" is literally "to work like a nigger", "to drink on one's own" is literally "to eat or drink like a Swiss";
- Degrading expressions of ethnic groups: "avoir les portugaises ensablées" = to be a real cloth-ears, to be as deaf as a post (Robert&Collins), "offre de Gascon" = hollow promise (literally in French "Gascon offer or promise"), "faire le Gascon" (literally, "to do the Gascon") = to boast, to brag, "être béotien en" = to be Boeotian in... = to be ignorant in..., "être la tête de turc de" = to be the laughing stock of... (literally in French "to be the Turkish head of...");
- Denominations that refer to both ethnic nomenclature and pejorative concepts: algonquin = individual without good breeding; apache = wrongdoer, hooligan;
- huron = ill-mannered, vulgar; juif (Jew) = money lender; kroumir = looter or despicable individual; un luron = rashly in love matters (for a male), une luronne = vigorous, bold and daring in love matters (for a female); malabar = rogue, sturdy fellow; mongolien = mongol (medical term related to genetic deficiency).

If the opponents of racial insults dream of an aseptic linguistic space, they may be ridiculed by the politically correct (taken seriously in North America, and laughed at in Europe, mostly in France) where semantic distortions are such that words do not have any of their original meaning (dishonest = ethically disoriented, drunk = chemically inconvenienced...). If racial insults were to be banished because of their negative connotation or derogatory character,

thousands of words would automatically be erased from the dictionary once declared taboo, vulgar, injurious, detrimental...

Dictionaries have the obligation to register and define, sooner or later, expressions and words that have been used by media, newspapers, novels, etc., without, any intention of anti-Semitic, anti-American or "anti-ethnic" propaganda.

Although we are against racial slurs, linguists and lexicographers believe that eradicating racial insults from dictionaries fearing that a foreign-language learner might inadvertently use them is not a solution because the definitions and warnings need to be available so that their use can be avoided. Erasing words from a dictionary does not eliminate racism and the harmful intent between people.

Finally, from one dictionary to the other, style labels and chronological indicators should not vary. Their chronological-register-notational marking should be consistent not only in one of these fields but in the combination of these same fields, so that the user would be alerted that these racial insults are liable to offend in any situation, and therefore are to be avoided.

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