THE LANGUAGE OF OTHERNESS: A LINGUISTIC ANALYSIS OF HOW FRENCH MEDIA CONSTRUCTS THE IDENTITY OF IMMIGRANT DESCENDANTS

Hakemi Sarra, *Research Associate, Master Graduate*
CSA Research
(Algeria, Sidi Bel Abbes)

DOI:10.24412/2500-1000-2025-10-2-196-201

Abstract. *This study examines the linguistic and discursive strategies employed by French media and portray the identities of second-generation immigrants, often referred to as "children of immigrants", through a sociolinguistic and critical discourse analysis framework. The research investigates how the media's lexical choices, syntactic patterns, and metaphorical framing shape public understanding of national belonging, citizenship, and "otherness." A qualitative analysis approach with data from French press corpora (Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération, and BFMTV) uncovers a systematic pattern: when immigrant descendants achieve excellence in sports or arts, their ethnic background is linguistically erased, while in coverage of crime or unrest, ethnicity and religion become hyper-visible.*

This duality, expressed through collocational tendencies such as jeunes de banlieue and issus de l'immigration, perpetuates a binary representation of "Frenchness" versus alterity. Analysis of frequent keywords in popular French journals confirms the asymmetrical attribution of "Frenchness," with positive events coded as universal and negative events linguistically marked as ethnic or foreign. Drawing on Hall's representation theory, Said's orientalism, and van Dijik's critical discourse analysis, this paper contends that these media narrative reinforces structural inequality through the politics of language. In conclusion, this shows that the discourse not only reflects social hierarchies but actively constructs them, influencing inter-group relations and shaping France's ongoing struggle with its colonial past.

Keywords: *media discourse, otherness, French journalism, identity construction, immigrant descendants, critical linguistics, discourse analysis.*

Language is not merely a vehicle of communication; it is a social technology that constructs categories of identity, belonging, and legitimacy. In France, where republican universalism officially rejects racial categorization, journalistic language nonetheless performs subtle acts of boundary-making. This paper explores the linguistic practices French media alternately absorb and exile citizens of immigrant descent erasing ethnic markers in narratives of national pride and hyper-visible marking in narratives of deviance. Understanding these patterns is essential because media language mediates public perception, informs policy debates, and contributes to the civic inclusion or exclusion of individuals and groups.

The study contributes to debates within sociolinguistics, media studies, and migration scholarship by providing a focused, qualitative analysis of lexical and syntactic mechanisms of "othering" in national media. The analysis pays special attention to: (1) lexical choices and collocations; (2) syntactic agency and voice; (3) spatialized metaphors (e.g., "banlieue"); and (4) temporal dynamics in coverage of high-profile events. By concentrating on a short but emblematic corpus, the paper prioritizes interpretive depth over breadth and offers actionable recommendations for newsroom practice.

Ultimately, understanding the French media's language of otherness is not only an academic exercise. It is crucial to address the broader issues od cohesion, equality, and representation in a multicultural country. By unveiling how linguistic structures perpetuate exclusion, this research contributes to the wider field of media, linguistics and critical discourse studies. It also points towards the transformative potential of language as in its ability to challenge than reproduce hierarchies of identity.

Literature and Conceptual Framework

The theoretical framework draws primarily on critical discourse analysis (CDA) and postcolonial theory. Stuart Hall's (1997) formulation of representation as a productive process underlines that language does not mirror reality but helps create it. Foucault's (1972) notion of discourse-

as-power further clarifies that institutionalized ways of speaking regulate what can be said and who may speak. Van Dijk's work on elite discourse (1993, 2018) highlights lexical strategies; such as emphasis, omission, and lexicalization; that reproduce ideological positions. Positive actions by minorities are depersonalized "France wins the World Cup", while negative actions are particularized "A young man of Algerian descent arrested for violence". The contrast creates an implicit boundary of belonging, where "Frenchness" becomes conditional and revocable. Postcolonial scholars (Said, 1978; Mbembe, 2013) emphasize the persistence of colonial taxonomies in contemporary representations of "the Other". Finally, Bourdieu's notion of symbolic power (1991) helps explain how seemingly neutral language practices reproduce social hierarchies.

Empirical studies on media and migration (Hargreaves, 2015; Bonnafous, 2006; Loriol & Lamontagne, 2018) provide important precedents showing that minorities are often overrepresented in negative contexts and underrepresented as authoritative sources. For example, when an athlete like Mbappé is framed as "French excellence" and his racial or ethnic identity disappears beneath the national signifier, in contrast to when a youth of similar origin commits a crime. Their "foreign origin" is resurrected linguistically to justify deviance. This paper builds upon and narrows those findings by interrogating the microlinguistic operations; collocation patterns, agency assignment, and metaphor usage; that enact "othering" in French national press.

Methodology

This research adopts a qualitative CDA methodology supplemented by close manual corpus reading. Eight articles were purposively sampled from four national outlets (Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération, and BFMTV) covering events between 2018 and 2024. Selection prioritized high-salience events that triggered national debate: the 2018 World Cup coverage, multiple reports on urban unrest, and the 2023 Nahel Merzouk shooting and subsequent riots. While the sample is limited, purposive selection allows us to trace linguistic strategies in emblematic moments where national narratives about identity crystallize.

Data analysis proceeded through manual coding and iterative reading. Coding categories included: (1) lexical markers of identity (e.g., "d'origine", "issu de l'immigration"); (2) spatial markers (e.g., "banlieue", "quartiers sensibles"); (3) agency and voice (active vs. passive constructions); (4) evaluative lexis (e.g., "violences", "fierté"); and (5) placement strategies in headlines and leads. Two rounds of readings spaced several weeks apart improved reliability and allowed the researcher to test initial interpretations against further contextual information (editorials, subsequent reporting).

This methodological choice reflects a trade-off: manual CDA sacrifices large-scale generalizability for rich contextual inference. However, the patterns identified are consistent across outlets and events, suggesting structural tendencies worthy of further, larger-scale investigation.

Analysis: Core Findings

Three interlocking linguistic patterns emerged from the corpus, where geographic terms become proxies for ethnic difference:

1. Erasure in Success Narratives: coverage of national triumphs tends to universalize protagonists. Headlines foreground "France" and "collective pride" (Le Monde's coverage of the French team's victory; such as the live report "La France Championne du monde: revivez les reactions et celebrations partout en France" (Le Monde, 15 July 2018)), while personal ethnic origin is rarely mentioned unless contained in human-interest side stories. In such contexts, athletes of immigrant descent are absorbed into an unmarked national subject ("les Bleus", "la France"), thereby signaling inclusion through omission.

2. Marking in Negative Narratives: conversely, reports of crime or unrest habitually preface individual actions with origin descriptors ("un jeune d'origine algérienne") or locational markers ("dans les banlieues"). For example, in Le Figaro's article **"Émeutes en banlieue: un jeune d'origine algérienne arrêté"** (May 2023), the headline foregrounds origin before the action itself. These descriptors function as indexical cues: they signal difference without naming race; consistent with a political culture that legally eschews racial categories. The rhetorical effect is to particularize deviance: wrongdoing is mapped onto identity or geography.

3. Spatialized Moralization: terms such as "banlieue", "quartiers sensibles", and "zones urbaines prioritaires" recur as moralized spaces. While these are ostensibly neutral administrative

categories, their repeated collocation with terms like “violences urbaines” and “émeutes” imbues them with a schema of threat. This type of wording transforms physical space into moral geography: the banlieue becomes France’s internal “elsewhere.”

Grammar, Agency, and Moral Assignment

Grammatical choices often encode moral judgments. Police actions are frequently presented in passive constructions (“un jeune est mort lors d’une intervention policière”), which occlude agency and diffuse responsibility. By contrast, descriptions of alleged criminal acts use active constructions that foreground individual agency and origin. This asymmetry contributes to a discursive economy in which state violence is grammaticalized as procedural accident while minority transgression is personalized and moralized.

The consequence is dual: first, a discursive minimization of institutional accountability; second, a heightened moral visibility of minority actors. Linguistic choices thus participate in broader processes of blame attribution and public accountability.

Case Study: The Nahel Merzouk Incident (2023)

On June 27, 2023, the killing of 17-year-old Nahel Merzouk during a traffic stop catalyzed widespread unrest. Media responses exemplified divergent linguistic strategies. Le Monde prioritized procedural description and contextual analysis; Le Figaro emphasized origin and locality in early reports; broadcast media used securitized, emotional lexicon (“les banlieues s’enflamment”, “nuit de violences”).

This divergence in framing shaped public reception. Outlets emphasizing origin and disorder fed narratives of spontaneous criminality, while those foregrounding structural contexts (police practices, socioeconomic precarity) invited interpretations of protest and grievance. The Nahel case thus demonstrates how early lexical choices in reporting can anchor public interpretation and legitimize certain policy responses (e.g., securitization) over others (e.g., accountability and reform).

Furthermore, editorial choices about placement affect salience, whether origin appears in headlines or only later in articles. Headline prominence of “d’origine” signals to readers that origin is salient to understanding the event, thereby naturalizing the link between identity and wrongdoing.

Case Study: Sports Figures and Conditional Belonging

High-profile athletes such as Zinedine Zidane and Kylian Mbappé exemplify conditional inclusion. While celebrated during moments of national triumph, their ethnic backgrounds are selectively invoked in contexts that challenge national narratives. When Zinedine Zidane won the 1998 World Cup, headlines hailed his as “Zizou, the pride of France.” Yet after the headbutt incident on 2006, the same outlets that previously praised him resurrected his Algerian heritage as an explanatory trope. Similarly, Kylian Mbappé’s leadership during the 2022 World Cup final was portrayed as a model of French excellence. However, when he spoke against police violence, far right commentators in Valeurs Actuelles questioned his “loyalty to France”.

This reversibility of linguistic inclusion points to the performative quality of belonging: linguistic inclusion is dependent on conforming to the desired national script. They are embraced in success and alienated and face scrutiny as “immigrant-descendants” in dissent.

Comparative press coverage shows that international outlets more readily celebrate multicultural composition, while domestic outlets frequently default to assimilationist rhetoric. This dissonance reveals a national linguistic habit: diversity is celebrated as proof of republican success but is not incorporated into routine descriptive categories, preserving the fiction of a homogeneous national subject.

Comparative European Perspective

Positioning France alongside other European media systems sharpens our understanding of its distinctive linguistic patterns. The British press historically uses racial categories more explicitly, reflecting a more multicultural public vocabulary, but also producing overt racial stereotypes. German media, in turn, often frame integration in civic and moral terms rather than explicit ethnicity. France’s strategy has specific consequences: it prevents direct naming and reckoning with structural inequalities. Without the lexical tools to name race or ethnicity, public debates remain abstract, limiting policy responses that require targeted interventions.

This comparative context suggests policy implications: lexical transparency (careful, contex-

tual use of origin- or ethnicity-related descriptors) can support targeted anti-discrimination measures, while euphemistic avoidance may hinder the recognition of systemic problems.

Media Responsibility and Ethical Framing

Journalism ethics traditionally prioritize accuracy, impartiality, and fairness. However, in contexts of systemic inequality, an uncritical adherence to 'neutrality' can perpetuate harm. Ethical framing in media should therefore include linguistic reflexivity: acknowledgment that choices of words, voice, and placement are not neutral. Practical newsroom measures include editorial guidelines on ethnic labeling (use only when relevant and contextualized), routine linguistic audits, and inclusion of diverse newsroom perspectives to catch unconscious lexical biases.

Media training should emphasize how to contextualize events; linking incidents to structural factors such as policing practices, economic marginalization, and historical discrimination; without excusing wrongdoing. Balanced reporting involves pairing descriptions of events with inquiry into causes and consequences, thereby resisting the simplification that fuels stigmatization.

Policy and Editorial Recommendations

Based on the analysis, the following recommendations can guide media practice and policymakers aiming to reduce linguistic othering:

1. Develop editorial language codes that specify when and how to reference origin or ethnicity, emphasizing relevance and contextualization rather than routine marking.

2. Implement linguistic audits that review headlines and leads for disproportionate marking of minority identity across beat reporting.

3. Diversify newsroom hiring and sourcing to broaden lexical repertoires and institutional sensibilities around identity-related language.

4. Foster collaborations between media organizations and academic centers to monitor language patterns and share best practices.

Future Research Directions

This study opens several avenues for further inquiry. Quantitative corpus methods could scale the findings presented here to test prevalence across decades and outlets. Computational approaches (NLP, semantic prosody analysis) may detect subtle collocational biases at scale. Mixed-methods work combining CDA with audience reception studies can assess how linguistic framing influences public attitudes and behaviors. Cross-national comparisons particularly within Francophone contexts (Belgium, Canada) would illuminate the role of legal and cultural frameworks in shaping media language. Finally, experimental studies could test the causal effects of lexical choices on perceptions of culpability, empathy, and policy preferences.

Conclusion

The language of French journalism systematically contributes to the construction of conditional belonging. By erasing markers in narratives of success and marking identity in narratives of failure, media practices foster a rhetorical environment in which “Frenchness” is performance-based rather than ascriptive. Linguistic habits that stem from republican universalism; intended to promote equality; paradoxically sustain exclusion by obscuring the lexical means to identify and address structural inequalities. Addressing these issues requires both institutional reform within media organizations and an expanded public vocabulary that can name and thus tackle inequality without resorting to stigmatization.

Appendix

This section provides English translations for key French terms, headlines, and expressions cited in the analysis.

French Term or Expression	English Translation/ Contextual Meaning
Issus de l’immigration	From an immigrant background
les banlieues	the suburbs
Quartiers sensibles	Sensitive neighbourhoods
Zones urbaines prioritaires	Priority urban zones (government-designated disadvantaged areas)
France Championne du monde: revivez les reactions et celebrations partout en France	France World Champion: relive reactions and celebrations across France
Fierté	Pride
Émeutes en banlieue: un jeune d’origine Algérienne arrêté	Riots in the suburbs: a young man of Algerian origin arrested
Un jeune est mort lors d’une intervention policière	A young man died during a police operation
S’enflamment	Ignite (often used to describe riots)
Violences urbaines	Urban violence (standard media phrase for unrest in suburbs)

References

1. Ahmed S. (2012). On Being Included: Racism and Diversity in Institutional Life. Duke University Press.
2. Bonnafous A. (2006). Media and the 'banlieues': Political discourse and spatialization. Journal of French Studies, 14(2), 123-140.
3. Bourdieu P. (1991). Language and Symbolic Power. Polity Press.
4. Bonilla-Silva E. (2014). Racism Without Racists: Color-Blind Racism and the Persistence of Racial Inequality in America. Rowman & Littlefield.
5. Fairclough N. (1995). Media Discourse. Edward Arnold.
6. Fassin D. (2019). Policing and Social Inequality in France. Urban Studies.
7. Foucault M. (1972). The Archaeology of Knowledge. Routledge.
8. Hall S. (1997). Representation: Cultural Representations and Signifying Practices. Sage.
9. Hargreaves A. (2015). Multi-ethnic France: Immigration, Politics, Culture and Society. Routledge.
10. Loriol M., & Lamontagne S. (2018). Corpus linguistics and racial discourse in French journalism: 2010-2018. Journal of Media Language Studies, 12(3), 221-248.
11. Mbembe A. (2013). Critique of Black Reason. Duke University Press.
12. Said E. (1978). Orientalism. Vintage Books.
13. Van Dijk T.A. (1993). Elite Discourse and Racism. Sage.
14. Van Dijk T.A. (2018). Discourse and Power. Palgrave Macmillan.
15. Wodak R. (2015). The Politics of Fear: What Right-Wing Populist Discourses Mean. Sage.

ЯЗЫК ИНОСТРАННОСТИ: ЛИНГВИСТИЧЕСКИЙ АНАЛИЗ ТОГО, КАК ФРАНЦУЗСКИЕ СМИ ФОРМИРУЮТ ИДЕНТИЧНОСТЬ ПОТОМКОВ ИММИГРАНТОВ

Хакеми Сарра, *научный сотрудник, магистр*
CSA Research
(Алжир, г. Сиди-Бель-Аббес)

Аннотация. *Данное исследование рассматривает лингвистические и дискурсивные стратегии, используемые французскими СМИ, и изображает идентичности представителей второго поколения иммигрантов, часто называемых «детьми иммигрантов», через призму социолингвистического и критического дискурсивного анализа. Исследование изучает, как лексический выбор, синтаксические паттерны и метафорическое оформление СМИ формируют общественное понимание национальной принадлежности, гражданства и «инойности». Качественный анализ, основанный на данных французских пресс-корпусов (Le Monde, Le Figaro, Libération и BFMTV), выявляет систематическую закономерность: когда потомки иммигрантов достигают успехов в спорте или искусстве, их этническое происхождение лингвистически стирается, в то время как в освещении преступлений или социальных волнений этническая и религиозная принадлежность становятся гипервидимыми.*

Эта дихотомия, выраженная коллокационными тенденциями, такими как jeunes de banlieue и issus de l'immigration, поддерживает бинарное представление «французскости» и «иностранности». Анализ часто используемых ключевых слов в популярных французских журналах подтверждает асимметричное распределение «французскости»: положительные события кодируются как универсальные, а негативные – лингвистически маркированы как этнические или иностранные. Опираясь на теорию представлений Холла, ориентализм Саида и критический дискурсивный анализ ван Дейка, эта статья утверждает, что эти медиатексты усиливают структурное неравенство через политику языка. В заключение, показывается, что дискурс не только отражает социальные иерархии, но и активно их конструирует, влияя на межгрупповые отношения и формируя продолжающуюся борьбу Франции с её колониальным прошлым.

Ключевые слова: *медийный дискурс, инаковость, французская журналистика, конструирование идентичности, потомки иммигрантов, критическая лингвистика, дискурсивный анализ.*