YOUTH'S LANGUAGE BATTLE: HURTING OR JOKING

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Abstract
Nowadays, young people's speech and precisely the way they tease each other is more often interpreted by outside observers as an expression of violence and a lack of respect. Within the peers' group, young people make a great difference between the personal insult and the "jibe" also called ritual insult. That linguistic practice is often considered by the teenagers as a social game between friends without any purpose of being harmful to somebody. The aim of this study[1] is to focus on the real functions of this activity inside the peers' group. It seems that the differences of perception or interpretation are largely linked with the fact that the subject belongs to the in-group or to the out-group. Teasing could be the translation of an adolescent peer system with its own rules and values. Young people (between 17 and 21 years old), living in a Parisian sensitive urban area were interviewed. All of them are schooling and belong to the second generation of French speaking immigration. A qualitative analysis was realized.

Keywords: *language, young people, jibe, context, identity, peers' group*

INTRODUCTION

At first sight, observing young people's speech could be surprising or shocking if you are not aware of this linguistic practice. For instance, when listening to adults talking together in front of the university near students, we notice the prevailing use of negative vocabulary in order to describe that linguistic activity. The more frequent terms are "violent, hurtful, offensive…screaming… shocking… they joke about the origins or the roots of their friends…or physical features, how they dare… they do not respect themselves...etc." A similar assessment was made by Léglise and Leroy (2008), when they interviewed social workers on that topic, in the outskirts of Tours (French town). In their study, the analysis of the discourses shows that teasing throws their subjects into confusion. They did not have the right code in order to define if the insult heard is personal or ritual. In the case of ritual insults, the notion of violence is missing in the data collected in this study. The subject of our sample did not mention it either. Neither did they make a link between teasing and being aggressive towards peers, especially friends. They mentioned that it is a daily activity which is very popular among teenagers. For example, some subjects of our sample say "*we do it all the time* (young girl, 17 years old)[2]"or "*with my friends… all the time…it's fun* (young boy, 19 years old)". They enjoy this practice which seems to be a way of making a difference with the adult's world and its norms and values. This paper would like to focus on the different meanings and functions of the jibe which are mentioned by the young people themselves. After defining ritual insult and personal insult, the peer group's influence on personal development and identity construction will be examined. At the end, the results will be set out and discussed.

[1] The data presented in this paper come from a project presenting by ed Marie-Madeleine Bertucci & Isabelle Boyer, and supported and funded by La Maison des Sciences de L'Homme de Paris Nord in 2012. The title of that project was "Ta mère, elle est tellement…: joutes verbales et insultes rituelles, chez les jeunes issus de l'immigration francophone".
[2] All the translations of the youth's speech are done by the author.

1 DIFFRENCES BETWEEN INSULTS AND JIBE

Before analyzing the functions of the ritual insults within peer group, it seems important to give a definition of the jibe or banter and to stress on the differences between jibe also called ritual insult and real personal insult. At first sight, three items contribute to define them: the pursuing goal, the topic of the insult and the process of interpretation.

1.1 Different goals

In his research, Perea (2011) based his definition of the jibe on the highlighting of the differences of pursuing goals. In the case of personal insult, the young people want to hurt, to humiliate the other referring to his/her origins, his/her job or his/her social behavior. That list of items is not exhaustive. Words are used by teenagers as authentic weapons (Lagorgette, 2006). It is not the case for the ritual insults which are mainly expressed with friends without any intent to hurt the feelings of membership. The notion of friendship is a great element, they do not mind insulting enemy or adolescents, but they don't want to lose close friends. Peer groups are based on actual interactions that are going on between all the members of the group. Inside the band, teasing peers has an integrative function. It is a way of showing his/her membership, his/her feeling of belonging to a group as Labov (1978) has already observed in his study of the linguistic features of African American Vernacular English and his analysis of sounding or playing the dozens. Focusing on the following goals shows that it is essential to distinguish personal insult from jibe, even if external observers have difficulty in distinguishing between the two of them. The jibe could be compared with the joust of the Middle Age, especially the nautical jousts which were thought of as a social game. In both cases, the subjects engage in an activity whose rules must be integrated and understood. The words replace the old lances. Young people like knights in the past have to face each other learnt in a friendly fight and to show their abilities and their skills. Nowadays, it is an oral sparring which is managed by its own norms (Boyer, 2013a). Ritual insult could be compared to an "organized oral action" (Labov, 1978). The oral jousts also give them the opportunities to show their superiority in this field and to take over a kind of "battle capital" as defined by Sauvadet (2005). "That battle capital" increases their credibility and their merit within the peers group. In fact they constitute a real oral joust which allow young people to show his/her belonging to the peer group and his/her dexterity. Teasing is a way of integrating the peer group and of gaining access to a social status inside the band, because the young person adopts the verbal behavior which is enhanced by his/her peers. The group as a social context provides opportunities to master specific social skills and ways of interaction.

1.2 A problem of interpretation

In his book, Labov (1978) discusses the origin of the ritual insults which have no real foundation. The lack of real basements and the distance from the reality is one means to recognize a jibe. That recognition induces a similar answer among the speakers who tease in turns. In the opposite, personal insults refer to reality or a part of the reality and often generate some reactions of denial or apologize. Nowadays, some researchers like Baines (2008) or Kochman (1983) indicate that it is not always the case, personal insult and jibe can have the same origin, indeed young people's teasing could originate in truth or a part of truth. Not even the choice of topic will allow the observer to differentiate banter and insults. The author suggests that it depends much more on the way the person interprets speech acts. The problem of interpretation is a main point in the study of jibe and insult. The interpretation could be linked with the status of the listener as it is indicated above in the text. If the observer does not belong to the peer group and is not an adolescent, it is difficult for him to make a difference between jibe and personal insult because he or she does not possess the right code. Within a peer group which can decode the message properly, the interpretation allows young people to define most of the time if the insult is a ritual one or a personal one. At the starting point, a ritual insult translates no intention of hurting membership. But a youth could be hurt or humiliated by some jibes. We are not referring to research which shows that at school, the purpose of teasing could change sometimes and become a means of rejecting peers (Moïse, 2011, 2010) especially if the young person is not

highly accepted, not very popular or too shy to answer properly. That case is not mentioned in our collected data. But we would like to stress on the delicate process of individual interpretation. Throughout an action of communication, all subjects share with their peers a kind of common interpretative framework in connection with social beliefs and representations, but each of them has also their own interpretative framework which is in function of their personal background, their past experiences, the fact of belonging to several cultural contexts and also the story of their family. The existence of the second interpretative framework increases the risk of misunderstanding and emphasizes the semiotic bias which always exists between expressing message and receiving message. In that case, the ritual insults could carry the risk of conflict or lack of understanding at least. The borderline between social games and personal attack becomes blurred. It is at this moment that the ritual insult becomes personal insult which could be perceived as an aggression or a stigmatization. Discussing Habernas, Goffman, Gumpez and François 's theories, El Mossadak (2013) concludes that the meaning of a linguistic behavior comes into light from bridges which are built between speech and scenes of the everyday life.

2 USING RITUAL INSULT INSIDE A PEER GROUP: A WAY TO CROSS OVER TEEN YEARS AND TO BUILD IDENTITY

Adolescence is a time of change and transition in which young people go on building and structuring their identity (Plivard, 2010) and self-esteem in relation to the image which is returned by the peers. The importance of the peer group increases at that period of life and that context gives the opportunities for young people to acquire and use social interpersonal skills. Indeed, all social subjects have to learn and master through the apprenticeship, the rules and the norms of their cultural context (El Mossadak, ibid). El Mossadak (ibid) focus on the importance of the interpretation during one interaction. The process of interpretation gives the meaning of the undertaken action.

2.1 Relationship inside the peer group

At that age, the relationships within the peer group, which are embedded in youth subculture, are very important (Pasquier, 2005). In a psychological approach, Valsiner defines culture as a "semiotic mediation", it means that it is a "*part of a system of organized functions, intra-personal (feeling, thinking, memorizing…etc.) and inter-personal: different persons are involved in chatting, fighting, persuading each other, avoiding.* " (Valsiner, 2000, pp.49). That definition could fit with the one of youth subculture. Even if they share with all adolescents a similar youth subculture, each peer group has and masters its own characteristics such as values and norms which must be accepted by all the members. Peers' groups are based on mutual interactions that are established between all the members of the group. These interactions have a great influence on their behaviors (Gottesdiener & al., 2010). If a young person would like to belong to that group, he or she must be accepted and incorporated by that group, in sharing mutual interests and the hobbies. The group is the context where they can develop skills which are valorized by teenagers like jibing. Teasing could be considered as a way of horizontal communication between peers (Galland, 2006). The better the adolescent is at teasing, the better is the position that he/she holds in his or her group. Inside peer groups, social processes like acceptance or rejection take place, resulting in having specific social position inside the group, called social status. That social status is relative to the positions of all other group members.

2.2 A process of conformity

Inside the group, a process of compliance or conformity[3] could be also observed due to the peers' social pressure. In that way, a young person who wants to belong to a particular peers' group, agrees

[3] In this paper, the concept of conformity refers to Fisher's definition (1996). A process of conformity could be observed when somebody changes his/her attitude and/or his/her behavior in order to fit in with the behavior and/or the attitude of the group. That concept comes from the field of the social psychology.

to adopt similar language and/or behavior (Gutton, 2007). That process could refer to different levels of influence: compliance, identification or internalization as described by Kelman (1958). His classification, even if it is a bit old, is still efficient to show the different degrees of appropriation of attitude and behavior by the subject. He describes three different processes of accepting influence:

> "*Compliance can be said to occur when an individual accepts influence because he hopes to achieve a favorable reaction from another person or group…Identification can be said to occur when an individual accepts influence because he wants to establish or maintain a satisfying self-defining relationship to another person or a group…He adopts the induced behavior because it is associated with the desired relationship…..Internalization can be said to occur when an individual accepts influence because the content of the induced behavior- the ideas and actions of which it is composed- is intrinsically rewarding. He adopts the induced behavior because it is congruent with his value system* (Kelman, 1958, pp.53)."

During adolescence, each step of that process could be overtaken by young people. The choice of compliance, identification or internalization widely depends on the young person's motivations, but also his/her own personality and his/her own desire to be embedded in the peer group. At that age, normative conformity is more often observed than informative conformity because the main motivations are to fit in with the group and the fear of being rejected.

2.3 Keeping the "face"

In the peer group, if the young person would like to hold a good position and to be popular, he or she has to develop the valorized skills. Mastering that linguistic activity allows him or her to hold a social status relative to the positions of all other group members. Every human being likes to keep his end up in social interaction. His/her concern is to show a good picture of himself or herself, referring to the sociological concept of face developed by Goffman (1973). "*The term face may be defined as the positive social value a person effectively claims for himself by the line others assume he has taken during a particular contact. Face is an image of self, delineated in terms of approved social attributes* (Goffman 1955:213.)" That picture must be recognized by peers, this point underlines the vulnerability of the face. In this way, the "face" can be lost, maintained, or enhanced, and must be constantly attended to in interaction (Brown and Levinson, 1987). Having a good practice of this activity recognized by his or her peers, participates to the development of self-esteem and identity of the young person. Goffman (1973) made a comparison between performance and real life. He demonstrated that in social interaction, as in theatrical performance, there is a front region where the "actors" (individuals) are on stage in front of the audiences. At that place, the subject desires to show and highlight a positive aspect of his/her character in front of the others. There is also a backstage that can be considered as a private place where a person can be himself or herself and sets aside his/her identity in society. A few years later, Alsaker & Froger (2006) define self-esteem and identity as followed: "*Self-esteem refers to how one evaluates one's own personal attribute. It may also denote the degree of self-worth one feels…..Identity refers to how one uses knowledge about oneself to find vocational, ideological, and sexual roles within a society that best express "who one is*"(2006, pp. 91). All things considered, teasing well is a mean for youth to have a valorized face reflected by peers. That valorized face is a proof of the more or less high acceptance by his/her peers and it really contributes to the development of the self-esteem.

3 METHOD

In order to collect young people's discourse and to explore the main functions of that linguistic practice, several interviews were carried out.

3.1 The choice of interview

The same question is present in each research: what is the validity of the method used in order to collect data. In the study presented here, we make the choice to collect oral data. The way to express or name something or somebody always translates the subjects' representation of the context (human and physical), its rules and the way to interact as Moirand (2009) described in a paper about youth's designation. We consider that it constitutes a convenient way to reach the subjects' beliefs and thought, even if there is some bias (Boyer, 2013b). In the future, they could be completed by observations especially in the case of collecting sample of ritual insults. The whole interviews were recorded. At each time, it is the youth who decides to end the sequence. His/her main reason to end the interview was that he/she had nothing to add. The length of the interview is nearly one hour, never less. The method of semi-guided interview was used. Guidelines were set up in case any of the young people had difficulty discussing that particular topic. The main questions were : Is teasing a daily activity? Why do you say jibe? With whom do you practice that activity? Do you think that it is important to be able to tease well? Why do you think that it is important? Is there a link between teasing and the age? When do you begin to tease? Could you tell me some examples of jibes?

3.2 The subjects

All the subjects were volunteers to take part in our research. They are between 17 and 21 years old and they live in a Parisian sensitive urban area, located in the agglomeration of Cergy-Pontoise. They belong to the second generation of French speaking immigration, especially from Africa. Young people are in further education, even if some of them are unemployed at the moment. They had no trouble with the police or the justice system. As in a previous study, that choice is motivated by the desire to show another picture of the young people living in a sensitive urban area. Belonging to a gang and becoming a juvenile delinquent constitute a part of the puzzle, but in no case the whole puzzle. The reality is much more complicated. In a previous research analyzing the youth's beliefs and conceptions about their housing estate, we focused on the fact that there is not one young person from sensitive urban area who will be an archetype, in fact they are several with their own personal characteristics (Boyer, 2012).

At the beginning, we would like to have the same number of boys and girls in order to investigate the gender question. But it is not the case here, even if it is obvious that some linguistic activities are influenced by the gender as it was already shown in several researches (Octobre, 2011, Pasquier, 1999). For example, Boys used more easily personal insults than girls who prefer ritual insults (Moïse, 2003). At present, we wonder if the analysis made in 2003 by Moïse is still allowed or possible. As part of this study, less girls than boys seemed to be interested by the topic of the research and agreed to participate. We also noticed that a lot of young women who agreed to participate in a first time, postponed the appointment two or three times. In the end 6 girls and 10 boys participated. How to explain the girls' behavior? One hypothesis could be made: they do not appreciate that activity and they do not see the interest to speak about, or they do not dare or want to be associated with these skills, showing an image of themselves which is not valorized in their cultural context of reference. The question is still open.

4 RESULTS AND DISCUSSION Main function of the jibe

The collected data show that teasing is a way to show the difference with the adults' world. Peer groups seemed to would be disconnecting from adult society, and adults could not penetrate these peer groups. It is one of the main reasons of the use of specific language. In fact, they create a "We Code"

as opposed to "Their Code" in order to show their differences and to keep adults at a distance (Fattier, 2004).The relationship in these groups are characterized by symmetrical reciprocity, they differ from relationship with the adults, which are more vertical. The adolescents spend a lot of time within peer groups. The "We Code" belongs to the youth sub culture, but also to the peer group. Nearly all the young people share that linguistic activity, but the meaning or the topic of the ritual insults could change from one group to another one. A similar assessment exists if we consider the youth language, all of the French youth know the word "bolos", but the meaning is not exactly the same everywhere. They share a common subculture, but they would like to show their specificities at the same time.

4.1 Importance of mastering

All of them say that it is a daily activity which is very popular among young people. The effect is that if you would like to be popular, you have to master these linguistic skills. You can notice that assessment in the following sentences: "*this person is very good in teasing…he is super funny*" (young girl, 17 years old), "*it is very important to be good in teasing, if you would like to be well considered…not to be considered as a "bolos*[4] (young boy, 20 years old) or "*if you are not good in teasing, you could not reach a good status within the group*" (young boy, 21 years old). Their speech translates the worry of keeping the face and of showing a positive image of himself or herself which is recognized by the peers. As we noticed before, the young people themselves are conscious that it is a way to consolidate his/her self-esteem and to take part to the construction of his/her identity. A process of conformity could be also observed. They accept the pressure of the peers' group because they would like to fit in with the group and in a second time they appropriate that behavior in order to obtain a valorized status.

4.2 Fun, social game

To the question "Why do you tease?" All of the subjects mentioned a notion of pleasure, of fun. It is also a way to master their energy and to maintain the cohesion of the peer group. It is also obvious for them, if you are young, you have to tease more or less. All young people banter, as you can notice in the examples below. "*Why we're teasing… it is an amusement, an entertainment…. It is important within the peer group. If we are teasing…there are good surroundings between us"*(young boy, 20 years old) or "*between us, we use it, from the adolescence, we grow up with it…, it is something humoristic, warm*"(young boy, 18 years old" or "*we do it all the time in order to enjoy ourselves, when we are teasing, it is for fun*"(young girls, 18 years old). The comparison with the nautical jousts made above, take on its full meaning. Teasing is a game, a social game with its own rules and completely embedded in youth subculture. The young people of our sample make no reference to violence or verbal attack. Quite the opposite, saying ritual insults is considered by them to be a leisure activity, a good way to master their energy. In our study, the collected data suggest that teasing seems to have a role of social control. It allows to keep the balance in the interactions inside the group and to avoid the memberships' energy being used in a negative way. It has a social function and participates in the cohesion of the peers group.

4.3 Integration

Teasing within a peer group shows that you belong to it, that you are integrated, "*it is a way to be integrated inside the group, because that guy is super funny*" (young girl, 18 years old) or "*between 12 and 15 years old, it is important to tease because we search our identity, we want to be accepted by the group, to be integrated*" (young boy 18 years old). Peer groups are a strong venue for socialization, therefore the importance of the acceptance of the young person by the group, as it is discussed above in that paper. As a form of humour, this activity takes part in the construction of the identity by

[4] Bolos : a person without interest, a little bit stupid. This word is typical of French youth's language. Its meaning is always pejorative, but some changes could be observed according to the context.

sharing a specific code (Kamieniak, 2005). It is a way to show that you know and master the rules and the norms of the peer group and that you accept them through a process of conformity as defined above in that paper. The process of compliance has a real influence on the building or the change of the youth people's attitude. In the end, they internalize the merits of that linguistic practice.

4.4 A contextualized practice

The most delicate part of the interview appears when we ask the subjects of our sample that question:"Could you tell us some examples of ritual insults?" Previously, the subjects were rather talkative, but their speech slows down at this point. It seems to be very difficult for them to cite some jibes, and it took a long time to obtain them. Two subjects say: "*I don't know….it is difficult here*"(young girl, 18 years old) or "*Without the friends…I don't know*"(young boy, 20 years old). Two explanations could be found, on the one hand they do not dare to express ritual insults in front of adults who belong to the out group, on the other that practice has no sense outside the context. It is a way to show the virtual dividing wall between youth and the adult's world which do not share the same linguistic code. When we collected the data, the subjects of our sample need to translate all the ritual insults because we misunderstood the most of them. It is obvious that the meaning of the jibe escapes us as the following example shows: "*you are dead in the movie"*(young girl, 18 years old) was translated by "*you are pitiful, you are bad, …if a beloved actor died in a movie, it is useless*". It is a social game based on interactions between friends and they have no partners during the interview. So it becomes difficult or even impossible to organize a words battle. It is also interesting to quote that less girls than boys give some examples and the number is not so high. They hesitate more than boys. The sample is too small to make a statement, but it could suggest that there is maybe a difference initiated by the gender. One hypothesis could be that saying ritual insults has not a similar role in accordance with gender. Being good at teasing is maybe less important for girls than boys, with the purpose of being integrated in peer group and having access to a valorized status (Trimaille & Bois, 2009). That hypothesis gives an orientation for future research. At last, we notice that the jibes are temporally contextualized, in relation with current events "*Your father is like DSK*"(young boy, 19 years old), or with the mood of the peer group and the fashion as they explained: "*the topics can change….It depends on the news….sometimes old jibes are again in fashion….we don't know why… it's fun*" (young girl, 18 years old). In accordance with our data, a part of the ritual insults seem to be very unstable, because they are influenced as well by the human context, the place, current events or the fashion.

CONCLUSION

The title of that paper asked the question if youth's language battle could be considered as a hurt or a joke. In accordance with the results of our study, the ritual insults could not be associated with violence and desire to be harmful to peers. The friendship is one condition of the emergence of that custom inside a peer group. Teasing is a social game which participates in the construction of identity and self-esteem. That function justifies the importance to be good in that practice. That linguistic activity functions like an identity marker because using a specific "We code" makes it possible to divide the young people and the adults' world. Saying ritual insults has also a role of social cohesion because it gives to the memberships the opportunities to release their excess of energy.

Youth's language battle is also a contextualized game which belongs to the youth's world and to the youth's subculture. Teasing is one characteristic of the youth subculture which could be define as follows: "*…culture represents a balance between what a wider community takes as canonical or predictable social reality, and what individuals or groups within that community conceive as possible worlds alternative to the canonical one*." (Bruner, 2001:207)

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