The “glocalization” of lexical borrowings in contemporary Metropolitan French
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Globalization, although “not new in substance, [but] new in intensity, scope, and scale” (Blommaert 2011:1), has been claimed to have resulted in a significant backflow of cultural influence from francophone peripheries, such as the Caribbean, the Indian Ocean, the Maghreb, and sub-Saharan Africa, towards traditionally French-speaking European urban centers. Although the linguistic outcome of multiethnic contact remains hotly debated today (‘ethnolects’ or ‘ethnic styles’, see Kern and Selting 2011), this paper claims that increased transnational circulation of ideas has resulted in one salient contact phenomenon: a massive influx of new lexical borrowings and patterns of adaptation.

Based on the longitudinal analysis of a lexical database of over two thousand loans, calques, and blends recorded in twenty-one printed and on-line general and slang dictionaries and databases published since the late 18th century, this paper shows evidence of quantitative and qualitative shifts in the origins and treatments of borrowings recognized as such in standard lexicographic practice in over 200 years in French. While the earliest official records still sampled a large number of borrowings from Occitan and Old Norse dialects, lexicographic data recorded after World War II point to a single donor language, English, as the main source of outside linguistic influence on French. The last major shift in patterns of officially attested lexical innovations in the corpus seems to have occurred in the late 1980s when, in addition to borrowings from English, a wide variety of loans originating from languages of the francophone peripheries (Arabic, Berber, Wolof, and French-lexified Creoles) started to appear in published records. Types of borrowings and patterns of nativization also varied, but no significant differences could be established between various types of loanwords, loanshifts and native creations (classification based on Winford 2003:45).

One noticeable tendency in the post 1990s sample is the recording of multiple adaptations of recent loans. For instance, the interjection ouèche ‘Eh quoi!', ‘Hi’, ‘So what!', borrowed from Arabic and officially attested for the first time less than a decade ago, seems to have undergone reduplication and metonymic extension, and it is now also attested in its newest form and meaning: ouèche-ouèche ‘jeune des cités’, ‘multi-ethnic youth’. Cross-referencing the most recent lexical innovation in general and specialized argot dictionaries with loanwords recorded in the on-line urban dictionary Le Dictionnaire de la Zone, between 2007 and 2011, revealed the continued dominance of English and Arabic as main donor languages of a large number of recent loans related to hip hop culture, new technologies, and everyday life. One emerging tendency is the systematic attempt at connecting widely circulated fixed expressions, calques, and loans to what is perceived as local linguistic practices in the working-class Parisian suburbs. While norm emergence cannot be established for these terms and expressions that, to date, only appear in the ephemeral urban dictionary corpus, attempts at grounding global cultural phenomena conveyed by recent loans into the everyday life of working-class multi-ethnic communities can be interpreted as instances of “glocalization”. If “language makes the people”, as the inventor of francophonie O. Reclus (1917:114) once argued, then there are reasons to believe that contemporary francophonie is becoming quickly unified in its global (lexical) diversity. Analyses of large text corpora remain necessary to verify whether these patterns of lexical innovation can be interpreted as longitudinal change in language use rather than lexicographic practice.