Catherine Tebaldi*

"#JeSuisSirCornflakes": Racialization and resemiotization in French nationalist Twitter

Abstract: After the 2016 spelling reforms deleted the accent circumflex from some French vowels, on right-wing French Twitter, the *circonflexe* reappeared in the center of the French flag – echoing the flag of Vichy France. Tweets with the hashtag *#JeSuisCirconflexe* resemiotized the accent circumflex as icon of a lost Frenchness, or voiced the racial other in a colonial faux pidgin to frame them as illiterate and brutish. Drawing on research on resemiotization (Leppänen, Sirpa, Samu Kytölä, Henna Jousmäki, Saija Peuronen & Elina Westinen. 2014. Entextualization and resemiotization as resources for identification in social media. In *The language of social media*, 112–136. London: Palgrave Macmillan) and raciolinguistics (Flores, Nelson & Jonathan Rosa. 2015. Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2). 149–171), this article explores how constructions of mock youth French use raciolinguistic tropes to imagine a language of social decline, connecting linguistic purism to racist myths of white genocide and the great replacement. Despite this, youth invert the imagination of their illiteracy, using playful language and satirizing white speech (Rosa, Jonathan. 2016b. Standardization, racialization, languagelessness: Raciolinguistic ideologies across communicative contexts. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 26(2). 162–183) to contest French nationalism – reframing *#JeSuisCirconflexe* as *#JeSuisSirCornflakes*.

Keywords: raciolinguistics, France, digital far right

1 Introduction

After the 2016 spelling reforms deleted the accent circumflex from some French vowels, the *accent circonflexe* reappeared in the center of the French flag, echoing the flag of Vichy France but with this diacritic in the place of Nazi collaborator Petain's axe. The image was tagged *#JeSuisCirconflexe* 'I am the accent circumflex'.

---

*Corresponding author: Catherine Tebaldi, University of Massachusetts, Amherst, USA, E-mail: ctebaldi@umass.edu

Figure 1: The circumflex flag.

Within a segment of French nationalist Twitter, this accent became a symbol of threatened French linguistic and cultural identity. Hundreds of tweets tagged *#JeSuisCirconflexe* decried the spelling change, blending cultural pessimism with reactionary humor. In the wake of spelling reforms, this accent was first made redundant, then taken up as an icon of lost French purity in right populist discourses that put linguistic purism to anti-institutional uses (see Figure 1).

Like this flag, a series of memes flowed from the slogan *#JeSuisCirconflexe*. These centered around the newly missing circumflex and transmogrified the accent from a simple linguistic element to an unlikely symbol of French linguistic and cultural genius. They linked the accent to Frenchness, and suggested the new spelling reforms would usher in a new era of multicultural decline. This redundant accent, perhaps because it was being replaced, was available to circulate and take on new social meanings. Through this process, the circumflex moves from linguistic modes to visual ones, and through a process of resemiotization, from a redundant accent mark to a sign of white French identity.

Resemiotization asks how semiotics shift across social contexts, and why. Leppänen et al. (2014: 8) see resemiotization as "the process of semiotic change in the circulation and flow of discourses across social and cultural boundaries". Here, we can trace flows from institutional discourses to Twitter, education to politics, accent to identitarian symbol. Semiotic change is multimodal, crossing the boundaries of language, concerned with the material forms of expression and their social, historical political context (Iedema 2003) and especially prevalent online

where visual, textual, and other social semiotic resources are available for processes of identification (Leppänen et al. 2014).

In this paper, I use resemiotization to ask how language, race and identity are constructed and contested in tweets with the hashtag *#JeSuisCirconflexe*. First, I look at the processes of resemiotization by which the accent circumflex became a symbol of lost white French identity, one threatened by current educational and political institutions. Next, drawing on work on raciolinguistic ideologies (Flores and Rosa 2015), I look more closely at one genre of meme associated with this hashtag – *#réformeorthographe,* 'spelling reform', which shows a replacement spelling, dictionary, or keyboard. These use colonial linguistic tropes to imagine a language of social decline, further connecting linguistic purism to not only to populism but to its deeply racist myths of white genocide and the great replacement. To conclude, I look at how white discourse is inverted (Rosa 2016a, 2016b), satirized, to contest French national populism – youth invert the imagination of their illiteracy, using playful language and satirizing white speech, reframing *#JeSuisCirconflexe* as *#JeSuisSirCornflakes*.

While recent researchers have looked at far right racial ideologies online (Hawley 2017; Minna-Stern 2019) and in France (Harsin 2018; Holmes 2006; Fekete 2018; Fleming 2017; Stoler 2016), or at the digital languages of the far right (Greene 2019; Ludemann 2018; Maly 2018; Paveau 2016) few have looked closely at how ideologies of language, race, and culture intersect in contemporary far right and populist discourses. Work on raciolinguistics (Flores and Rosa 2015; Vigouroux 2017) or racial discourses in France often focus on indirect racism or *discours de haine dissimulée* (Baider and Constantinou 2019; Bouzereau 2019), or on republican color blindness (Devrient et al. 2018). Raciolinguistics is less often used to look at right wing groups or explore how nationalist and populist ideals of linguistic and racial purity are co-articulated. This work builds on a growing interdisciplinary literature around race and language in digital linguistic anthropology, (Ludemann 2018), bringing concepts of raciolinguistic ideologies and resemiotization to bear on analysis of the online right's reaction to a spelling change, their simultaneous investment in linguistic purism and mistrust of educational and institutional discourses.

2 Context

2.1 Linguistic context of the spelling reform

In 2016, the French Minister of Education Najat Vallaud–Belkacem announced long planned spelling reforms, eliminating some unpronounced letters and

accents and regularizing others. Several of the changes did not spark great controversy; new rules for hyphenated numbers and words, for example vingt–quatre for 24, or the placement of the tréma (¨), over the letter u it modifies rather than another vowel. Some spelling changes to common words, however, such as the elimination of "i" in "oignon" or the change from "ph" to "f" generated a great deal of interest in both print and social media. By far the most controversial of these was the deletion of the accent circumflex.

While the protest around the circumflex suggested it would be wholly erased, it was only eliminated when it was redundant and shaped neither meaning or pronunciation. The circumflex was preserved in open vowels where it changes pronunciation, such as /a/, where it makes the sound /ɑ/, as in *château* 'castle'. Further, the circumflex was not eliminated in proper names or the conjugations of the simple past. The circumflex was deleted from close vowels /i/ and /u/ where it plays no phonetic role. as long as the accent did not distinguish between homophones as in *jeune* 'young' and *un jeûne* 'a fast'.

This small spelling change occasioned a very large Twitter reaction. Arguments for linguistic purism quickly became about more than language, moved from jokes about sleeping with young men like "je vais me faire un petit jeûne, je vais me faire un petit jeune. De l'importance de l'accent circonflexe" 'I'll do a fast, I'll do a young man, a circumflex matters'[1] to racist conspiracies that saw the education minister as eliminating Christian education along with the circumflex.

French linguistic purism is not new. Concerns over language, nation, and *nationalisme linguistique* (Boyer 2008) have a long history in France. However, the circumflex controversy inserts these in new ways into an integral, populist and racist discourse. Standard language has been a key part of building a national community and national identity (Boyer 2008), and legitimating the nation (Tétart 2009). However, the national language is typically linked with the state and its educational and cultural policy (Judge 2000), enforced by national institutions such as schools (Weber 1976). So much so that pure or authoritative language (Woolard 2016) is referred to as institutional or schoolteacher's French (Balibar 1985). However, in this case the push to purism is positioned against the current government and the education minister, and pure language is marked by some as anti-elite and anti-institution.

---

1 This very common joke turns on the similarity between the phrase "se faire un petit jeûne", a familiar way to refer to a brief fast, and "se faire un petit jeune", to have sex with a young man. "Se faire quelqu'un" is a colloquial way to refer to sex, not unlike the English "to do someone".

2.2 Cultural context of the spelling reform

The spelling reform in 2016 occurred during a time of conflict over national identity, immigration and the assimilation of French people with migrant backgrounds, made more salient both by the 2015 Islamic State terrorist attacks and by the depredations of global capitalism. As Balibar and Wallerstein (1991) note, economic insecurity and uncertainty of identity leads to crisis racism that has recently manifested in increasing support for the right.

Following Harsin (2018), I refer to the broad spectrum of right wing and populist Twitter users as the White Right. I chose this term, rather than identitarian or populist, to highlight the role of race in this discourse's construction of nation, identity and people. Many may be supporters of Marine Le Pen's National Rally, but the online right is not limited to this. On Twitter it is not always clear where any individual user locates themselves in the complex ecosystem of traditionalist catholic integralists, fascists, royalists, and national populists that make up the French *fachosphère.*

The White Right's opposition to the spelling reform uses populist language, in particular that of a pure and unitary people, discursively opposed to an evil or weak elite (Wodak 2015). However, while discursively constructed as unitary and powerful, the elite may not be those with the greatest wealth or cultural power. HoSang and Lowndes (2019) note that in populist discourse functionaries, government workers, union leaders, and professionals make up the educational or cultural elite. Instead elites are those who are seen to lead or benefit from cultural change. Populist discourse can be mobilized by one fraction of the elite against another, so Donald Trump or Marine Le Pen can declare themselves on the side of the average worker from gilded family mansions, or members of the Academie Française can speak out against elites. Often, discourse about elites turns towards the conspiratorial; elites are seen as engaging in shadowy processes of alienation or nefarious social engineering.

The most central conspiracy theory to this argument is that of the *Le grand remplacement,* also referred to as the American term "white genocide", a racist conspiracy theory cited by many on the French White Right including the National Rally. The name originates with *Le Grand Remplacement,* a 2011 book by Renaud Camus, stating that a globalist elite is promoting immigration to replace white people and cultures. Camus' racist conspiracy of cultural decline states that within a generation French people will be both replaced and replaceable, no longer an integral culture that unites a people in a singular cultural expression (Holmes 2010) but through diversity made a deracinated, deculturalized, un-nation. For some on the right, following an integralist belief in a singular language, race, land,

and culture, the replacement of the white Frenchman was mirrored in the loss of the accent circumflex. Its defense was perhaps a way to fix, and racialize, the language/culture nexus (Sherzer and Webster 2015).

3 Data collection and analysis

I initially became aware of reactions to the spelling reform during pilot fieldwork in Paris 2016, in part due to my own struggles with spelling. While my analysis is informed by the initial news and social media reaction, data was collected on Twitter. Twitter is a social media platform where users can post 140 character tweets (280 since 2017), images or memes, and use hashtags to link the tweet to a topic. Users can like, retweet, or reply to texts. Twitter is searchable by user and by hashtag, and results are displayed by greatest popularity or by date.

I used digital ethnography that emphasized the user experience (Ryabovolova and Hemment 2020) searching and scrolling Twitter much as any user would, and saved my searches with the MaxQDA coding software. First, I relied on my own Twitter feed and the organic connections I made as a user, following hashtags, retweets, and replies. I saved tweets with *#JeSuisCirconflexe* and collected popular, frequently retweeted, or controversial memes. During initial searches, I noted many of the most-liked tweets with *#JeSuisCirconflexe* were associated with the hashtag *#RéformeOrthographe,* so I repeated the same process and searched and collected tweets with this hashtag. Twitter is not a monologic space, and hashtags are often associated with satirical positions; I also sought out hashtags critical of linguistic purism. After a French television interview with its author, I became aware of *#SiLesNoirsParlaientCommeDesBlancs*, 'if black people talked like white people', and searched Twitter memes and tweets associated with this hashtag. This hashtag retweeted several memes from the satirical leftist site Blague Block. I further developed this corpus using MaxQDA, which allowed me to search Twitter, import, save, and code images and tweets. I did this for *#JeSuisCirconflexe*, *#RéformeOrthographe, Blague Block,* and *#SiLesNoirsParlaientCommeDesBlancs*. In total, I collected a corpus of 900 tweets and 80 memes.

I take a raciolinguistic perspective (Flores and Rosa 2015) on these multimodal texts, and use linguo-visual semiotic analysis (Mendoza-Denton 2016). This analysis, which comes from Norma Mendoza-Denton's work on race, language, and global capital, focuses on the symbolic aspects of media and their connection to space and place, which is central to an understanding of the White Right and nationalism. As a method adapted for digital data, it is a multi-layered and composed of both discourse and semiotic analysis. This dual visual and linguistic

Figure 2: *Je Suis Circonflexe*, in the same style as signs for *Je Suis Charlie*.

analysis for an exploration of resemiotization and reactionary politics in this corpus of memes and tweets.

4 Circumflex, resemiotization and the French White Right

#JeSuisCirconflexe began as a resemiotization of a number of circulating public words (Spitulnik 1996) that reflect anxieties of white France around language, culture and race. "*Je suis circonflexe*" is a transformation of *Je suis Charlie*, the slogan that expressed support after the satirical news magazine Charlie Hebdo was attacked for its sexualized depictions of Mohammed (see Figure 2).

This formulation is one of many *#JeSuis* hashtags that reflects anxieities about national identity, Islam and terrorism. On the center right, *#JeSuisEnTerrasse*, 'I am on the terrace', celebrated a Parisian lifestyle after the Islamic State attacks on République and Batalaclan. More troublingly, *#JeSuisCirconflexe* further recalls the far right slogan *#JesuisCharlesMartel*, referring to the crusader who pushed Muslims out of France. The circulating *#JeSuis* has linked identity with Islamophobia or anti-immigrant politics, and this underlies *#JeSuisCirconflexe*'s connecting a spelling change to lost Western culture (Finkielkraut 2016).

The Twitter storm around *#JeSuisCirconflexe* links linguistic prescriptivism to right populist discourses. The right-leaning politics of these is evident in the large number of political cartoons that mock the former president, as well as women and

Figure 3: Je Suis Cir "con" Flexe.

minorities in his cabinet. The image below replaces the middle syllable with an image of then President Hollande. Hollande, a socialist, was elected in 2012 but legislated states of emergency rather than economic security, and was characterized as a weak and ineffective leader by both left and right (see Figure 3).[2]

A linguo-visual analysis shows it discursively playing with the face of the president, as substitutes for the middle syllable in *circonflexe*, *con*, to suggest that Hollande is a *con* 'ass' or 'idiot'. It also uses the visual elements of his unattractive face and comical expression to further underline this meaning. As the majority of the #*JeSuisCirconflexe* images made fun of left politicians or their ineffective policies, for example suggesting they fixed unemployment by removing the circumflex from the word *chômage* 'unemployment'. This anti-institutional humor was not simply a humorous reaction to a spelling reform coming when economic reforms were needed. Often these descended into caricatures of the forms of embodiment of black women, such as mocking the eyebrows of Christiane Taubira (a black French minister, responsible for marriage equality) as shaped like circumflexes. Mocking of the physicality of black women is a common aspect of right populist, producerist discourses (HoSang and Lowndes 2019). The circumflex crossed social and linguistic boundaries – and created a populist discourse expressing political satire, economic anxieties, and racial caricature.

It may seem that an accent mark does not have enough significance to come to be a symbol of white identity. Yet, as Holmes notes in his work on the far right, "mundane forms of collective practice can be linked to sublime political yearning" (2006: 390). Iedema (2003) adds that resemiotization allows us to ask why a particular semiotics is mobilized in a given social moment. Here, resemiotization is a tool to analyze why the circumflex was mobilized by the White Right. What processes of identification were created and what social and institutional affordances shaped the use of the circumflex in this particular moment? What forces of social change were reflected in this linguistic resentment politics that permitted the circumflex to move from being a superfluous accent to an icon of the myth of the great replacement?

Leppänen et al. (2014) note that resemiotization is part of processes of (dis) identification, where multiple digital semiotic resources are mobilized to actively construct belonging and difference. Associated with identity through

---

2 Not all use of this humor was reactionary. For example, some mocked the government's rightward shift by suggesting the new spelling change *gauche* 'left' was now spelled *droi* 'right'.

#JeSuisCirconflexe and its visual placement, for example at the center of the French flag, the circumflex is actively taken up to symbolize Frenchness – in a transgressive way with the evocation of the Nazi-collaborationist Vichy regime. A linguo-visual semiotic analysis shows how images of the *circonflexe*, from the image of the flag that indexes Frenchness, Vichy, and nationalism, are paired with language that mocks official and educational discourses, but also, with *#JeSuisCirconflexe*, that asserts belonging and identity. The French white right is also deeply invested in ideas of linguistic prescription and cultural purity, but they mobilize these in new ways within populist, anti-institutional discourses.

While national symbols were used positively, politicians and cultural elites were satirized. Because the circumflex's removal was announced by the female minister of education, of North African heritage, this spelling change was already both racialized and associated with a professional or cultural elite. The circumflex then becomes part of a linguistic resentment politics, a symbol of replacement to come. It's not simply the circumflex, but the institutional elimination of it that matters. It stands for not just Frenchness, but Frenchness made salient by the threat of replacement.

As Holmes (2010) explains, the right insists on *intégrisme* in the face of transnational capitalism, an integral nation consisting of a pure language, culture, and race. Intégrisme, as Holmes explores in his ethnography of the French far right, consists of populism, the valorization of belonging to a land's true people, expressionism, the idea that cultural and linguistic practices come from the soul of this people, and pluralism, the idea that different peoples are incommensurate. Intégrisme undergirds the myth of the great replacement, the conspiracy that elites are working to interrupt and undermine these deep connections between people, land, culture, language. These myths of an integral nation and an evil elite help to understand how even insignificant details like an accent can connect to strongly held ideals of belonging as expressions of a national soul – or as seen in the next section, expressions of a threatening future.

5 Spelling and social decline

#JeSuisCirconflexe was not only a slogan or a tag for political jokes. One of the largest subsets of the memes associated with the hashtag *#JeSuisCirconflexe* were jokes about the spelling changes, *réforme de l'orthographe*, which depicted the language of the future. These made fun of the new spellings and of a hypothetical future French, often by introducing new dictionaries, new keyboards, or new alphabets. A linguo-visual analysis shows how they combine visual evocations of

Figure 4: Wazo, bird.

place, French nature and culture, with highly pejorative racializing discourses to shape images of social decline.

For example, the image in Figure 4 has changed the spelling of bird, from *oiseau* to "wazo".

While, as the circumflex accent on the flag linked language and nation, these memes link images of European nature to a future of post-great replacement social decline. Visually, this songbird posed on a snow-dusted rock perhaps links beauty, peace, and nature to a temperate climate and forested land; this is not a tropical bird. In contrast, the language framing it in bold white impact font, suggests an aggressive reform that dumbs down language – as if to say that future viewers of this bird will not know how to spell, or perhaps even to speak of, the "wazo".

The choice of the spelling "wazo" is neither related to the reforms, nor accidental, but represents longstanding racial tropes and raciolinguistic ideologies. Flores and Rosa (2015) explain how raciolinguistic ideologies show how ideas about good, correct, or appropriate language are inextricably intertwined with ideas about race. Vigouroux (2017) explains that written representations of African French construct black speakers as illiterate and incompetent, and French as an exceptional, civilized language. Conventionalized bad French became an "African linguistic figure" (2017: 8), which is not a reflection of speech but a reflection of raciolinguistic ideologies, a representation that that has persisted from the 19th century fake dialect *Petit Nègre* to the 20th century fake colonial pidgin known as *Français Tirailleur* and contemporary representations of urban French.

Fanon (1952) describes illiteracy as one of the more common colonial language ideologies, the assumption that colonized peoples are incapable of literate, adult speech or thought. Fogarty (2008) describes how pidgin French was in fact taught to colonized subjects in order to maintain their social exclusion. Vigouroux (2017) notes that this language became the image of colonial speech and persisted in French imagination. Current raciolinguistic ideologies, as represented in this

Equalizer
@moha_ddict

2015 : nénuphar
2016 : nénufar

...

2032 : la plante ki nage

Figure 5: "2015: waterlilly, 2016: waterlily … 2032: plant that swims".

SÉLECTION SPÉCIALE
RÉFORME ORTHOGRAPHIQUE

TwoIVerlaine
@Tw0Iverine

2015 : oignon
2016 : ognon
2023 : truk ki fé pleuré

Figure 6: "2015: onion, 2016: onion, 2023: thing that make cry".

cartoon, seem to repeat similar ideals of illiteracy and exclusion, but do so in imagining a white population which fears it will also be similarly threatened.

Similar conventionalized representations of Black and Arab speech, and the same raciolinguistic ideologies, occurs within the future French memes, as shown by the dictionary images in Figures 5 and 6.

The meme in Figure 5 juxtaposes a plant associated with the French landscape and artistic tradition, an image of peaceful French nature, with language that suggests racial difference and cultural decline. It begins with a spelling change that would eliminate *ph* for *f*, something that was described by some on the right (Finkielkraut 2016) as an attack on the Greek roots of European, western, civilization. That this was part of a project of constructing a white classical past, threatened by a dangerous multicultural future, is shown when they ignored Arabic etymologies; scandals over circumflexes far outpaced any discussion of whether *nenufar* 'waterlily' comes from Arabic *nīnūfar*. This small spelling change is seen, according to the meme posted by Equalizer, as the beginning of rapid descent into imprecise language and childish thought – soon it will just be called "plant that swims". This future fuzzy and impoverished vocabulary is also written

using the codes of Mock Creole, replacing *qui* with *ki*. This substitution of the common French *qu'* with *k*, not used in that alphabet but frequent in some Creole orthography, racializes this linguistic figure of stupidity.

Similarly, Figure 6 by TwolVerlaine suggests that the new spelling for onion, which removed an *i*, will soon be *truk ki fé pleuré*, and the spelling change again is a sign of imminent cultural and cognitive decline.

Here as well, although the 2015 and 2016 spellings are dictionary standard, the 2023 spelling reflects raciolinguistic ideologies more than actual linguistic shift, the colonial linguistic figures described by Vigouroux (2017). *Truc* 'thing' is spelled with a *k*, and *qui* is rewritten *ki*, an orthography that would be pronounced similarly but emphasizes linguistic distance and racial difference. This meme also uses grammatical errors to suggest illiteracy, replacing *er* with the homophone *é*, as in the past participle *pleuré* for the infinitive *pleurer* 'to cry'. Because these words sound the same when spoken, but are visually and syntactically distinct, they underline the image of the speaker as illiterate. Finally, both examples use these spellings to voice a linguistic figure of illiteracy with stupid, imprecise, childish vocabulary.

This second group of images associated with the spelling reform show Mock Creole, reinforcing the connection between linguistic and cultural purity by showing the violation of spelling norms as a racialized social decline. Both the imagined superiority of the French language and the imagined deficiency of the language of the other perpetuate monoglossic norms and continue to stigmatize youth of color today. The invention of one standard as an unmarked norm also produces the language and identity of the other no longer as different but as deviant from this standard (Bucholtz and Hall 2004) (see Figure 7).

This image is a sarcastic advertisement for a keyboard based on the 2016 spelling reforms. The keyboards, meant to visually represent future language, display several of the linguistic figures that make commentators anxious about the future of their culture. The keys also offer similar images of online or text message language, such as smiley faces, abbreviations, multiple punctuation marks, and borrowed English words. The intertextual consistency (Hill 2005) of these images, always suggesting deficient language and imprecise thought, further confirms the pejorative colonialist tropes in these images and the raciolinguistic ideologies they show.

The first row shows mock Creole spellings, including the substitution of *é* for all other spellings of those vowel sounds, and the heavy use of *k* and *w,* which are not common in French orthography. These include both standard Creole orthographies, as in *mwa* 'me' and *twa* 'you' and invented creolized spellings like *koi* for *quoi* 'what'. *Tsé* replaces *c'est* 'it's', spelling the French word with a series of letters that would never occur in that language. These spellings do not reflect

Catherine DC @CathAloha · 3 h
@ChattamMaxime les nouveaux claviers sont disponibles !
#ReformeOrthographe 😙

↩   ↻ 48   ♥ 53   •••

Figure 7: "Spelling Reform 2016: the new keyboards are available."

conventional digital abbreviations; *c'est* is abbreviated as *c* in text messages. Instead these are consciously portraying youth language as a kind of mock pidgin, showing youth online practices with the same kinds of ideologies of deficiency as earlier images.

Intertwining multiple images of linguistic impurities, the idea that future generations will be speaking a mix of Internet slang, emojis, English, and Mock Creole suggests that the future language will be one of intellectual and cultural decline – not just childish cartoons, but American globalist Simpsons. The future decline is highly racialized; the fear that the language of the future will be that Black and Brown children. Yet, while other studies of colonial linguistic ideologies link this to the past and backwardness, these memes shape populist discourses of cultural decline, replacement, and a fear for the future.

The raciolinguistic ideologies evident in this pessimistic linguistic future are even more evident in a final series of images that connect future French to Arabic – and terrorism. These do not position a multicultural, urban, popular culture as the symbol of French linguistic and cultural decline, but instead center on Arabic as a symbol of youth difference. A since-banned tweet repeats the same image of the *nouveaux claviers* 'new keyboards', but replaces it with the image in Figure 8 of the *alphabet de remplacement* – not simply the new alphabet but a reference to the theories of white genocide or the great replacement.

Figure 8: Since-banned tweets declared that this Arabic alphabet was the new French alphabet.

These images tie worries about youth language and imprecise language to other anxieties around terrorism and echo the language around *le grand remplacement*. Arabic script is resemiotized here, a visual representation of difference and threat. They move beyond questions of spelling to position Arabic as the language which will replace French, just as the right fears that people of color will replace white French people.

In a vision where change is decline, Blackness is seen as illiteracy and Arabic is an attack. Alain Finkielkraut, a conservative member of the governing body of the French language, the Academie Française, linked spelling mistakes in French mean that youth of color must think that Arabic is the only true language (2016). Because the 2015 Bataclan theater attackers made mistakes in their letter claiming responsibility, spelling mistakes, in his view, become a kind of linguistic terrorism – a sign of the Arabicization of French, which parallels and plays into the White Right's fears of the Arabicization and Africanization of France.

In these discourses of replacement, a small spelling change became the beginning of a sinister plot and a state-sponsored cultural decline. The loss of a letter or an accent became the sign of a loss of linguistic precision, and with it a slide from French linguistic genius to a future of illiteracy and languagelessness (Rosa 2019). Discussions of the replacement alphabet are explicit discourses of Frenchness under threat from both elites and terrorists, associating white Frenchness with the old spelling and therefore positioning it as the thing being replaced. The circumflex is resemiotized to reflect white right discourses of resentment, racism, and replacement. Linguistic purism becomes tied to populist myths, less to construct a shared past as to bolster white identity by imagining a terrifying non-white future.

For the white right, the center-left government's elimination of the circumflex became a symbol for the conspiracy theory that white French people are being replaced by immigrants. The white French speaker became identified with the circumflex, and through populist discourses framed linguistic change entangled with fears that the elites were changing the language and the culture, and replacing the people. The loss of the accent circumflex was the first step towards a new language, shown in hoary reactionary visions of linguistic and cultural decline. Against the backdrop of conspiracies like *le grand remplacement,* linking identity to linguistic purism became calls for cultural and racial purity.

4 Inverting illiteracy

The white right tweets around *#JeSuisCirconflexe* used linguistic prescriptivism to evoke white identity and cultural pessimism, framing a future of white replacement and illiteracy. However, this purism also generated a mocking counter-reaction on Twitter. Another group of tweets consciously mocked the furor over the accent circumflex, and the racism it expressed, by comparing *circonflexe* to the similar sounding English words *Sir* and *cornflakes* (see Figure 9).

The identification with *#JeSuisCirconflexe* is mocked as *je suis sir cornflakes*, a play with sound that also satirizes the pretentiousness of the linguistic purists. In the first image, the word *accent circonflexe* becomes "accent cir cornflakes". This nonsense mocking undermines any identity claims or deep meaning, how can one assert they are a cornflake? In the second image, created afterwards, it becomes "sir cornflakes", perhaps imagined as a ridiculous and anti-Republican nobleman. As in Leppänen et al.'s Finnish rapper, by playing with similar sounds they are able to use processes of resemiotization to disidentify with and mock these discourses. This resemiotization continues with the visual play in these images.

Figure 9: Accent Cir Corn Flakes, Je Suis Sir Cornflakes.

These images play with, mock, and invert claims to linguistic purity. In the first image, the box of cornflakes indexes everyday objects and advertising images, highlighting the common use of English and other kinds of so-called impurities in French. Comparing this now politically charged accent to a bland American breakfast cereal recalls just how silly it is (ironically, breakfast cereals have also been taken up as a symbol by the North American far right Proud Boys, showing just how often meanings can cross borders); it highlights whose language and which linguistic changes are now seen as problematic. The second image "Je Suis Sir Cornflakes" makes direct visual analogy to the black background and white text of *Je Suis Charlie*, but the comparison now highlights the absurdity and mundanity of the circumflex. It is not an issue of free speech or journalism, but people insisting they are knights of processed food. Together, the verbal play of *sir cornflakes* and visual juxtapositions highlight a claim that a lost circumflex is no more a symbol of decline than a box of cornflakes.

This mocking response to the circumflex is part of a broader phenomenon on Twitter and other digital "discursive technology" (Paveau 2012), that resemiotizes elements of far right discourses to challenge racism. In particular, this paper will look at two ways in which the far right linguistic purism is reappropriated: first, how memes shared by Blague Block repurpose the far right's mock pidgin to challenge far right social movements; second, how *#silesnoirsparlaientcomme-desblancs*, 'if black people talked like white people', resemiotizes hypercorrectness as mock white speech.

The Facebook page Blague Block is a site devoted to subverting memes for revolutionary ends. *Blague Block* is itself a play on the English expression 'black bloc', referring to anonymous leftist protesters who wear black and often work to protect other protesters from police. Many users of this site weighed in on the circumflex controversy, using humor to highlight the racism or the pointlessness linked to linguistic purism. To begin, an example of how the right wing purist's imagined language of social decline is turned against them.

The image below, taken from the left-wing youth site Blague Block, uses similar resemiotization and visual and verbal play to critique the National Front.

The tweet in Figure 10 uses resemiotization of advertising symbols, specifically the Nike swoosh, to say "fuck the FN". Visual and verbal play with negative images of Black French contests racist politics associated with the National Front (now the National Rally). In an image that could recall the broken language of the far right's new keyboards, with their mix of Americanisms and bad spellings, this group asserts "N/nike the FN". First, the Nike symbol is resemiotized to suggest not a sneaker but the sound of its name, *Nike*, which recalls the vernacular term *niquer* 'fuck' when it is written. Second, this play draws on the rules of Mock Creole

Figure 10: Nike le FN, "Fuck the National Front".

Figure 11: A sign mocking the far right. "Here it is, they are coming… The assholes in your city center".

spelling, where *qu* is substitute for *k*, and the fake ungrammatical *é* for *er*, which allows *Nike* to stand in for *niquer*. Mock Creole is creatively used by leftist youth to show a very different kind of French linguistic genius.

Youth also uses embodied images and familiar vocabulary to critique racist and homophobic politics, as in the satirical resemiotization of an anti-migrant poster in Figure 11. The original poster, put out by the National Front, was

essentially a visual version of the conspiracy theory of white genocide. It stated that migrants were arriving in the center of the town and, by implication, taking it over. The second poster image shown in Figure 11 adapts this to assert that it is not migrants who are arriving, but assholes.

Blague Block edited the photo to show participants in a right wing anti-gay marriage and anti-abortion protest. It uses crude drawings of penises, silly adolescent humor, and the comically inarticulate slogan *jamais ça* 'never that' to satirize the unreconstructed views of this group. These memes repurpose colonialist images of the Other as hyper-sexual, or childlike and delinquent. They also use elements of mock language such as simple grammar that recalls the Mock Creole of illiterate youth. They use these not, as do the right, to frame a dangerous future, but to contest present fascist politics.

While the examples from Blague Block used verbal and visual figures of delinquent and illiterate language, a second group of memes and tweets formed around the hashtag *#silesnoirsparlaientcommedesblancs,* 'if black people talked like white people', which mocks the idea of appropriate, standard or correct speech. Rather than reusing colonial images of youth language to attack the right, the tweets use highly standard French to reveal the everyday racist discourse of white French people. This kind of inversion has been previously shown in youth language play.

Minoritized youth have been seen to use language play to contest power (Jaspers 2011; Rampton 1999; Shankar 2008). Rosa (2016a, 2016b) explains how youth use inverted Spanglish to satirize white Spanish speakers in the United States, offering hyper-correct versions of textbook Spanish that sound like a novice classroom speaker or exaggerated accents that mock Anglo pronunciation. Tetreault (2015) similarly shows Maghrebi youth using a mock "TV host" register of super-standard French to satirize white adults. In these examples from French Twitter, similar moves are made that satirize not only standard language or linguistic purism, but the racial attitudes they reveal.

The images in Figure 12 imagine a speaker of color saying one of the more typical instances of everyday white racism. They are part of a large body of tweets such as "Catherine, how can you pronounce that? I will call you Kadidjatou instead". By showing a white listener in a comical fashion what their speech sounds like, they highlight the ridiculousness of the racism that is associated with accepted language.

The vast majority of the tweets use a super-standard French, one that obeys conventions for written speech and orthography and does not include any vernacular language, spelling errors, or familiar terms. This creates a mocking image of white French as stiff and serious, which underlines the ridiculousness of the racist propositions they satirize. This mock white speech is used to invert

Figure 12: "White people all look alike", "White kids are so cute, I went to Europe and I wanted to adopt them all".

common sayings around race, and the racial and linguistic hierarchies that are commonly asserted. Appropriate language is used to show just how inappropriate these ideas are.

The linguistic figure of the standard and correct is paired with humorous images that also recall stereotyped images of white celebrities and vacations. The statement in Figure 12 that white people all look alike satirizes the too-common statement that people of color all look alike, and is paired with an image of several young white male actors who do all look quite similar. In this, the presumed special status of the white man, and the white gaze, is mocked. In the second photo, the genre of Instagram or Facebook volunteer-tourist photos is mocked and inverted while common phrases about adorable children satirize the feminine "white savior". Further, the tourist photo plays with ideas of place and belonging, inverting where is foreign and where is home, as well as who is the volunteer and who are the objectified cute children. The speaker rolls many countries into one Europe, which recalls the trope of the white person who believes Africa is one country. Many other tweets play with the idea of place, identity, and belonging, positioning white people as outsiders.

Tweets that replace white speakers with black ones play with this myth of replacement and question the white normativity the far right desires. These tweets use very similar forms of language play and purism as the white right, but do so to challenge connections between language, culture, and race. They contest who the "normal" speaker is, playing with and highlighting assumptions about how language, race, and place are put together. By inverting these sayings, they mock white speakers, call attention to racist language, and remind us to question who and what is imagined as French.

5 Conclusion

This paper has explored how the circumflex accent became taken up as *#JeSuisCirconflexe* in a manner similar to *Je suis Charlie*, to express white French anxieties in a time of cultural conflict. The circumflex became a symbol of French identity and French linguistic purity, which was taken up by the white right. Eliminated by a left education ministry, it could become a symbol of how elite cultural change threatened the white French way of life. Through both discourses of purism and satire of political elites and racial others, the replacement of the accent sparked populist visions of white replacement and anti-racist satires.

As Petrović 2018 explains, satire is ambivalent and reveals heterogeneity within a public. It can be used to contest boundaries between language and

culture, to reveal the tensions at the center of a language/culture nexus (Sherzer and Webster 2015). Yet the white right also uses satire to reinforce these connections between language and culture, using purism and play to mock left politicians and create images of illiterate youth, and seeing themselves in an accent mark. In the tweets linked to *#JeSuisCirconflexe*, resemiotization, satire, and play are used in multiple and ambivalent ways to create an image of a threatened ethno-cultural unity, as well as by those who wish to draw attention to and challenge this desire for homogeneity.

The white right used the circumflex to create an image of whiteness under threat, and through resemiotization of this accent as a symbol of loss, invested deep meaning in a mundane accent. Their language play and resemiotization did not question the connections between language and culture, but called to solidify and racialize the language-culture nexus. It reflects integralism, a belief in a singular white French race with a language as their unique cultural expression. Language change was linked to intellectual and cultural decline, as in the resemiotization of linguistic elements like *k* and *é* to depict the racial other. The spelling reforms repeat old raciolinguistic ideologies of the illiterate native and the French genius in a new form as part of a right populist myth of white replacement.

In parallel to these deep investments in diacritics, mocking discourses on the left questioned the integralist belief in language as the expression of the soul of a people. Their humor took elements of prescriptivist discourse or racist linguistic figures to challenge racial tropes and right wing movements. These inversions questioned and pushed apart the link between language and nation, place and race. Further, their satire with jokes about cereals and noblemen highlighted the mundanity of the accent mark and of spelling rules more generally. By mocking the circumflex as cornflakes, they asserted it was just an everyday, dull concept. Just an accent mark, not a symbol of cultural loss. The satire and language play on right and left showed two contrasting visions of language and race; one where language is naturalized as the innate expression of a people, and one where it is seen as a cultural practice embedded in power relations, sometimes mundane, sometimes racist, sometimes funny.

Even within a single hashtag, like *#JeSuisCirconflexe,* there were multiple ways of understanding linguistic prescriptivism and cultural change. While some saw cultural pessimism, others saw opportunities to mock this drive for cultural, racial, and linguistic purity. The far right vision of an integral people with a unique cultural expression has not been realized. While the right invested accent marks with racist resonances, left satire reasserted that it was as mundane as breakfast cereal. For every person who said *Je suis circonflexe* there was another who mocked them as *Je suis Sir Cornflakes.*

References

Baider, Fabienne & Maria Constantinou. 2019. Discours de haine dissimulée, discours alternatifs et contre-discours: présentation. *Semen 47*.

Balibar, Renee. 1985. *L'institution du français*. Presses Universitaires de France-PUF.

Balibar, E, Wallerstein, I.M, Wallerstein, S.R. 1991. *Race, nation, class: Ambiguous identities*. Verso. Verso.

Bouzereau, Camille. 2019. Le néologisme lepénien: Un marqueur discursif de haine dissimulée?. *Semen 47*.

Boyer, Henri. 2008. *Langue et identité, Sur le nationalisme linguistique*. Limoges: Lambert-Lucas.

Bucholtz, Mary & Kira Hall. 2004. *Language and Identity. A companion to linguistic Anthropology*, 369–394. Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons.

Devriendt, Émilie, Marion Sandré & Michèle Monte. 2018. Dire ou ne pas dire la « race » en France aujourd'hui. *Mots 116*.

Fanon, Frantz. 1952. Peau noire, *Masques blancs*. Ed de Seuil, Paris.

Fekete, Elizabeth. 2018. *Europe's fault lines: Racism and the rise of the right*. London & New York: Verso Books.

Finkielkraut, Alain. 2016. La France, l'orthographe et l'école. Répliques [podcast produced by France Culture on 26 March, 2016]. https://www.franceculture.fr/emissions/repliques/ saison-29-08-2016-02-07-2017 (accessed 1 September 2016).

Fleming, Crystal Marie. 2017. *Resurrecting slavery: Racial legacies and white supremacy in France*. Philadelphia, PA: Temple University Press.

Flores, Nelson & Jonathan Rosa. 2015. Undoing appropriateness: Raciolinguistic ideologies and language diversity in education. *Harvard Educational Review*, 85(2). 149–171.

Fogarty, Richard. 2008. *Race and war in France: colonial subjects in the French army*. 1914–1918. JHU Press.

Greene, Viveca S. 2019. "Deplorable" Satire: Alt-Right Memes, White Genocide Tweets, and Redpilling Normies. *Studies in American Humor* 5(1). 31–69.

Harsin, Jayson. 2018. Post-truth populism: The French anti-gender theory movement and cross-cultural similarities. *Communication Culture & Critique*. 11(1). 35–52.

Hawley, George. 2017. *Making sense of the alt-right*. New York: Columbia University Press.

Hill, Jane. 2005. Intertextuality as source and evidence for indirect indexical meanings. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 15(1). 113–124.

Holmes, Doulgas. 2006. Supernationalism—integralism—nationalism: Schemata for twenty first-century Europe. In Gerard Delanty & Krishan Kumar (Eds.). *The SAGE handbook of nations and nationalism*, 385–399. London: SAGE Publications.

Holmes, Douglas. 2010. *Integral Europe: Fast-capitalism, multiculturalism, neofascism*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.

HoSang, Daniel & Joseph Lowndes. 2019. *Producers, parasites, patriots: Race and the new right-wing politics of precarity*. Minneapolis: U of Minnesota Press.

Iedema, Rick. 2003. Multimodality, resemiotization: Extending the analysis of discourse as multi-semiotic practice. *Visual communication* 2(1). 29–57.

Jaspers, Jürgen. 2011. Talking like a 'zerolingual': Ambiguous linguistic caricatures at an urban secondary school. *Journal of Pragmatics* 43(5). 1264–1278.

Judge, Anne. 2000. France:'One state one nation one language'. In *Language and nationalism in Europe*, 44–60. Oxford: OUP.

Leppänen, Sirpa, Samu Kytölä, Henna Jousmäki, Saija Peuronen & Elina Westinen. 2014. Entextualization and resemiotization as resources for identification in social media. In *The language of social media*, 112–136. London: Palgrave Macmillan.

Ludemann, Dillon. 2018. /pol/emics: Ambiguity, scales, and digital discourse on 4chan. *Discourse, Context & Media* 24. 92–98.

Maly, Ico. 2018. Populism as a mediatized communicative relation: The birth of algorithmic populism. *Tilburg Papers in Culture Studies*. (213).

Mendoza-Denton, Norma. 2016. *Norteño and Sureño Gangs, hip hop and ethnicity in youtube. Localism in California through Spanish accent variation. Raciolinguistics: How language shapes our ideas about race*, 65–80. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Paveau, Marie-Anne. 27.02.2012. *Activités langagières et technologie discursive. L'exemple de Twitter*, n La pensée du discours [carnet de recherche]. http://penseedudiscours. hypotheses.org/8338, consulted 03.03.2020.

Minna-Stern. 2019. Beacon, Boston.

Paveau, Marie-Anne. 13/06/2016. *((()uif))). L'antisémitisme des parenthèses*, in La pensée du discours [carnet de recherche]. https://penseedudiscours.hypotheses.org/14579, consulted 03.03.2020.

Petrović, Tanja. 2018. Political Parody and the Politics of Ambivalence. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 47. 201–216.

Rampton, Ben. 1999. Deutsch in inner London and the animation of an instructed foreign language. *Journal of Sociolinguistics* 3(4). 480–504.

Rosa, Jonathan. 2016a. *From mock Spanish to inverted Spanglish*. In H. Sami Alim, John Rickford & Arnetha F. Ball (Eds.). *Raciolinguistics: How language shapes our ideas about race*, 65–80. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Rosa, Jonathan. 2016b. Standardization, racialization, languagelessness: Raciolinguistic ideologies across communicative contexts. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 26(2). 162–183.

Rosa, Jonathan. 2019. *Looking like a language, sounding like a race*. Oxford studies in the Anthropology of Language. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ryabovolova, Alina & Julie Hemment. 2020. "Je suis Satisfaction:" Russian politics in the age of hybrid media. *East European Politics* 36(1). 9–26.

Shankar, Shalini. 2008. Speaking like a model minority:"FOB" styles, gender, and racial meanings among Desi teens in Silicon Valley. J*ournal of Linguistic Anthropology* 18(2). 268–289.

Sherzer, Joel & Anthony Webster. 2015. *Speech play, verbal at, and linguistic anthropology*. Oxford Handbooks Online. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Spitulnik, Debra. 1996. The social circulation of media discourse and the mediation of communities. *Journal of Linguistic Anthropology* 6(2). 161–187.

Stoler, Anne Laura. 2016. *Duress: Imperial durabilities in our times*. Durham, NC: Duke University Press.

Tétart, Frank. 2009. Partie 1. Le nationalisme, un concept idéologique et géopolitique ?. In Tétart, Frank. (Ed.) *Nationalismes régionaux. Un défi pour l'Europe*, 9–48. Paris: De Boeck Supérieur.

Tetreault, Chantal. 2015. *Transcultural teens: performing youth identities in French cités*. Hoboken, NJ: Wiley.

Vigouroux, Cécile. 2017. The discursive pathway of two centuries of raciolinguistic stereotyping: 'Africans as incapable of speaking French'. *Language in Society* 46(1). 5–21.

Weber, Eugen. 1976. *Peasants into Frenchmen: the modernization of rural France*. 1870–1914. Stanford.

Wodak, Ruth. 2015. *The politics of fear: What right-wing populist discourses mean*. Sage.

Woolard, Kathryn. 2016. *Singular and plural: Ideologies of linguistic authority in 21st century Catalonia*. Oxford.