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“Zy-Cray” French: Verlan in the Wild

Imagine if someone said "zy-cray" to describe the state of being deranged or being extremely enthusiastic about something. That would be crazy right? See what I did there? In case you don't get what I'm talking about, you will by the time you finish reading this article. Because the newer generations of French speakers are doing just that. They're inverting the words they use to make new ones—the second half or part of the word goes first, and the first part goes at the end. Mind = Blown. This phenomenon is called "verlan" (“vair-lahn” (/vɛʁ.lɑ̃/), which is the inverted version of the word "toward" in French "envers" (“ehn-VAIRSS” (/ɛ̃.vɛʁs/), since the new versions of the words are constructed by going backward in the syllables. A neat little trick in the name itself.

To give you some examples of what that looks like, “louche” (crazy) becomes “chelou”, “femme” (woman) becomes “meuf,” “lourd” (something/someone that is annoying, tiresome, or a pain) becomes “relou,” “énervé” (angry) becomes “vénère”, and so on.

- **louche** → **chelou** — “loosh” (/luʃ) → “shuh-LOO” (/ʃə.lu)
- **femme** → **meuf** — “fam” (/fam) → “muhf” (/mœf)
- **lourd** → **relou** — “loor” (/luʁ) → “ruh-LOO” (/ʁə.lu)
- **énervé** → **vénère** — “ay-nair-VAY” (/e.nɛʁ.ve) → “vay-NAIR” (/ve.nɛʁ)
- **fou** → **ouf** — “foo” (/fu) → “oof” (/uf)
- **fête** → **teuf** — “fet” (/fɛt) → “tuff” (/tœf)
- **flic** → **keuf** — “fleek” (/flik) → “kuff” (/kœf)
- **arabe** → **beur** → **rebeu** — “ah-RAHB” (/a.ʁab) → “burr” (/bœʁ) → “ruh-BUH” (/ʁə.bø)

If you're looking at some of these words and wondering why the parts of the new word don't look anything like original, it's because the verlan versions adjust their spelling and pronunciation to fit the phonotactic rules (those governing which sequences of sounds are allowed) of the language. Verlan typically flips **syllables** (not always strict halves), then **repairs** the output to sound French—schwas appear, clusters soften, and vowels shift so they're pronounceable in rapid speech. Over time, items can even **re-verlanize** (e.g., *arabe* → *beur* → *rebeu*), or drift in meaning/register from neutral to slangy.

Yup, the French decided to make one of the most complex phonetic systems in the world even more complex. And while this is a cool novelty from their perspective, things can get especially challenging from a second language speaker's perspective! Even though I had heard about verlan and also taken several French classes before studying abroad in Nantes (“nahnt” (/nɑ̃t/) in France, it was one of the last topics I mastered in my French acquisition journey. That makes sense given how verlan actually spreads: through **music, comedy, social media, and friend groups**.

No classroom or textbook is teaching you about verlan. And to make matters worse, new words appear regionally as well, almost like memes that get popular in one part of a country but not the others.

For example, during a field trip to Caen, I met a group of theatre students that kept referring to my friends and I as "les cainris." I came to the conclusion that "cainris," pronounced "keh(n)-REE" (/kɛ̃.ʁi/) must have something to do with Caen, pronounced "kahn" (/kɑ̃/). This experience, however, turned out to be the perfect illustration of a classic **L2 learner trap**. I thought I was in genius mode, but my hypothesis soon stopped making sense given the various contexts they were using the word in. Upon probing further, it turned out that "cainri" was just the verlan for "americain" — "ah-MAY-ree-ken" (/a.me.ʁi.kɛ̃/). I am visibly shaking my head even while writing this article. I told myself it was okay that I didn't figure "cainri" out because I'm not even American! But there's plenty of other instances like this. In practice, you guess from local cues (place names, rhymes, social in-jokes), but verlan often **isn't transparent**: the split may be unexpected, vowels may shift after inversion, and a term may be **common in one city** and **unknown two hours away**.

Fast-forward back to Nantes, and no one has ever used the word in their life. Mais quelle folie ! (What craziness). That's the L2 learner's reality with verlan: it behaves like **living slang**. It is playful inversion with serious social weight: it signals in-group identity, keeps language lively, and gives learners a fun (and humbling) puzzle. To keep up, it helps to build a small **personal lexicon** (chelou, relou, meuf, ouf, teuf, keuf), jot both an **easy** pronunciation ("tuff") **and IPA** (/tœf/), and expect regional surprises. When in doubt, ask; most speakers are happy to gloss their slang, and hearing it **in context** is the fastest way to lock in both sound and sense.