

Jaytalking in the Streets of Bordeaux

Jeni Peake, PhD Candidate

Email: Jeni.peake@etu.u-bordeaux-montaigne.fr

Department of Anglophone Studies, University Bordeaux Montaigne, 33607, Pessac

Abstract

The term jaytalking is used to define the many forms of urban inscriptions: from stickers, posters, and tags, to graffiti and street art (Merrifield 2002). When the population takes to the streets they express their true feelings (Bushnell 1990). Authentic jaytalking is powerful and reveals contemporary thoughts and feelings (Brown 1995). The word jaytalking epitomises the rebellious nature of urban inscription. It is dangerous, risky, and is written in the public domain. Not only is the act of writing in a public place rebellious, but more often than not the content is also rebellious. Common themes include critiques of the status quo, challenging cultural values, and condemnations of governing bodies. This paper identifies a third means of rebellion: linguistic rebellion. Youths often use language to express and align themselves with their respective communities of linguistic practice (Wenger 1999) and young French citizens are no exception, as instances of English inscriptions can be found throughout the country. This paper identifies English and hybrid urban inscriptions found in urban spaces in the city of Bordeaux, France. Through analysis of the corpus, I aim to understand to what extent the use of English might be understood as a political, rebellious and creative act.

Keywords: Graffiti, language, identity, street art, hybridity

Introduction: Questions and methodological approach.

Jaytalking is a neologism first used by Andy Merrifield (Merrifield 2002) and later revisited by Elizabeth Sage in 2016. *Jaytalking* is a pun on jaywalking - the act of crossing the street where it is forbidden (Cambridge Dictionary Online 2020). Although neither Merrifield nor Sage thought that a definition was necessary, Sage gives the following explication:

...jaytalking, like jaywalking, is street behavior, a form of speech that occurs in the space between two rows of buildings, encompassing the sidewalk and the traffic pavement, as well as all other public spaces and fixtures found alongside or on city streets: stoops, doorways, alleys, plazas, café terraces, bridges, quaysides, market stalls, trees, flower boxes, benches, lightposts, urinals and signposts (Sage 2016, 856).

Sage explains that due to the similarity of the words, readers can instinctively understand the concept of *jaytalking* as: “talking where and how we are not supposed to, ignoring the rules that tell us where speech is and isn’t appropriate, avoiding the powers-that-be as we communicate within public space in ways that are surprising, unforeseen, creative, and prohibited (Sage 2016, 856).”

In this article the term *jaytalking* is used to refer to all types of street communications, with a particular focus on urban inscriptions such as: tags, graffiti, and pictorial art. Urban inscriptions are a means of creating a link between “the viewer, artist, and their worlds” (Casino 2019, 225) as it opens up a dialogue for people who do not normally have a voice. *Jaytalking* is a common feature of our scriptorial landscape (Gade 2003) and is therefore the perfect example of visual expression. *Jaytalking* is also an example of text art where the “language is the image, or a dominant element of the visual field” (Jaworski 2014, 140). However, graffiti,

tags, and street art not often viewed as traditional art because they are often the work of an individual in a public space without permission from the relevant authorities (Keough 2010) and yet graffiti is one of the oldest forms of writing known to man (D. D. Gross and Gross 2016).

An important element of graffiti is that it is simultaneously private and public. Private as it is often anonymous, and yet public because it is written in urban spaces with the intention of being seen. Therefore, the *jaytalkers* are not restricted by social etiquette and can give honest reflections of the current status quo including the freedom to discuss topics that are normally taboo (Gonos, Mulkern, and Poushinsky 1976). *Jaytalking* is often considered as a means of expression for the marginalised (Casino 2019) who are frequently denied “a role on the public stage [...] by official institutions” (Bushnell 1990, 813). The main method of rebellion that will be assessed in this article is language choice. Youths use language to express themselves and identify with their chosen communities of practice (Wenger 1999) which means that by choosing a specific language the writers take charge of their own lifestyle or choose to follow a trend, this is otherwise known as expression of agency (Lawson 2015). The aim of this article is to focus on the use of language in instances of jaytalking, exploring the ways in which language is used as a means of rebellious communication and critique of current events. This article thus explores the presence of English, hybrid and French jaytalking found in urban spaces in the city of Bordeaux, France. To do so, I will address the following questions: 1) To what extent is the use of English understood as a political or rebellious act, 2) How do English and hybrid inscriptions reflect French speakers’ linguistic identities? This study is based on 59 instances of urban inscriptions found in Bordeaux and its surrounding suburbs. As mentioned earlier, the act of tagging, creating street art or writing graffiti is by nature rebellious, therefore, for this study the criteria used were that the content of the inscription must also be rebellious or critical. The data was then sorted into various themes, locations, types, and languages.

Background Context

The study this article is based on took place in Bordeaux, in the south-west of France. Bordeaux is the sixth largest metropolitan city in mainland France, and due to its size, student population, and wealth, is also a pivotal and very politically active city. This was most recently demonstrated during the *gilets jaunes* (yellow vests) movement, which started in November 2018 and is still taking place in some cities, Bordeaux being one of them (The Local 2019). Bordeaux is the biggest city in its region and therefore many disgruntled protestors come from the surrounding countryside towns in order to demonstrate and protest political dissatisfaction. Bordeaux is also home to two universities spread over six campuses, as well as several Business and Engineering schools. This means that a significant part of the population in Bordeaux is made up of students. In 2017, students were displeased with the proposed educational reforms and they barricaded one of the central campuses for approximately five months. Therefore, Bordeaux is well-known as a city where the population makes itself heard and consequently an appropriate city for this research.

Working Definition of Key Terms

Despite graffiti, tagging, and street art being a feature of our streets for almost 60 years and becoming popularised in the 20th century (Casino 2019) there is still some debate about the terminology used. Defining “graffiti” and “street art” is a challenge for academics, for the purposes of this study, the following terms have been defined as follows:

Graffiti: words and sentences sprayed written or printed in the street. It is a means to change public surfaces through painting, writing, or engraving (Quintero 2007). (Fig. 1).

Tags: the artists’ and writers’ calling card. They mark the places they have been with their unique pseudonym as a means of gaining notoriety but also to feel a part of the tagging community. This internal communication is understood by all writers and artists, for instance when one person tags in an area it attracts other tags. Tags are often formed by words, letters, or numbers which are used by the artists and writers as a signature (Fig. 2).



Fig. 1-Example of graffiti, photograph taken by the author, Gradignan (2019)



Fig. 2-Examples of Tags, photograph taken by the author, Villenave d'Ornon (2019).

Pictorial art: work that is primarily pictorial rather than scriptorial, meaning that the image is the main focus and that there are few or no words (Fig. 3).

Text Art

Graffiti and pictorial art have only recently been accepted as part of the art world, becoming mainstream when a New York museum hosted a graffiti exhibition (Casino 2019). Graffiti and pictorial art have also become more present in society with the arrival of street artists like Banksy who have become a household name and very prominent in the art world. In the world of art history, text and image have often been linked; for example, the first letter in texts was often heavily decorated in medieval literature (Jaworski 2014). *Text* can be defined either “spoken or written languages” (Fairclough 2013, 3). Texts themselves are used to represent reality, facilitate social interactions

and form new identities (Halliday 1978). Text art is where the “language is the image, or a dominant element of the visual field” (Jaworski 2014, 140). *Jaytalking* is the ultimate example of text art as it combines words and art in one piece. Text art has had a variety of different names, it has been defined as “linguistic landscape” (Coupland 2012) or “semiotic landscape” (Jaworski and Thurlow 2010), “displayed language” (Eastman and Stein 1993), “discourses in place” (Scollon and Scollon 2003) and finally, “staged linguistic performances” (Bell and Gibson 2011). As a common feature of our streets it is evident that *jaytalking* can be described all of the above terms. “Image-text relations – and their investigation within a broad range of disciplines from literature and philosophy to art history and geography – have a rich and varied tradition.” (S. Gross 2010, 277).”



Fig. 3-Pictorial art inspired by the corona virus, photograph taken by the author, Bordeaux (2019).

Jaytalking in Second or Third Languages

Generally, urban inscriptions are either in the language of its country of origin, as it is designed to reach the maximum number of onlookers, or in the first language of the person who creates it. However, there are writers who choose to write in a language that is not an official language of the country where the graffiti is created. Bálint Varga suggests that this could be a case of writers overestimating “the linguistic abilities of their contemporaries, transmitting their own experience to the entire society” (Varga 2014, 965). Whereas others believe that it is simply a reflection of the writer’s own language habits and choices.

Very little research has been done on *jaytalkers* who write in another language. There have been some instances of English graffiti in countries where English is not an official language. Brown found popular culture references and unusual English phrases in Szeged, Hungary including “dirty words, names of western pop groups and obscure English phrases” (Brown 1995, 115). According to John S. Bushnell, in the 1980s English language graffiti in Moscow became popular for expressing praise whilst Russian was the language of choice for blame (1990).

In the cases of some artistic fields, such as rap and hip hop, the use of a foreign language “can reveal unexpected meanings, alternative trust that broaden the scope of the sayable and the imaginable” (Kramsch 2006, 102). Language is just another means to express a person’s identity. There are several levels to identity: the internal individuality (the self) and the social identity (the person)

(Reynolds 2016; Riley 2007). Language is not just defined by our cultural identity. According to Daniel Gade, our cultural identity is communicated within a territorial space which means that the semiotic properties of texts are often linked to their geographical interaction with other texts and the social actors themselves (Gade 2003; Scollon and Scollon 2003). Language is often viewed as one of the most important factors in defining cultural groups, this is because “language is not only seen, it is felt; and that is why its role in nationalism is so emotional” (Gade 2003, 429). Therefore, the choice to go against the national or traditional language can be seen as an act of rebellion and even unpatriotic.

Language Hybridity

Orysia Demska explains that “language makes cultural hybridity visible while also being an element of it” and therefore “linguistic hybridity should be treated as a part of cultural hybridity, rather than as a separate phenomenon” (Demska 2019, 2). It is argued that language is not a part of a culture that can be removed, language and culture are interdependent and interconnected (Tinker 2011). This means that for language to be hybrid there must be two distinct languages which are being consciously used together, (fig. 4). Mikhail Bakhtin defines linguistic hybridity as social language contact in an utterance, or the meeting of two or more linguistic consciousness (Bakhtin 1982). Explicit linguistic hybridity can be either unconscious or conscious, is it normally viewed as the beginning of hybridisation and can affect the language users, whereas implicit linguistic hybridity tends to be unconscious and is naturally present in the language (Demska 2019).



Fig.4-An example of hybrid graffiti featuring English and French. (Translation: Struggling University. We Don't say OK Professor, but OK boomer) photograph taken by the author (2019).

Hybridity is easily identified on our streets, it can be seen on signs, in business names, and in *jaytalking*. Given the nature of urban areas, and the effects of both immigration and globalisation, urban areas are often influenced by hybridisation (Demska 2019). In fact, this globalised world has meant that all linguistic landscapes are hybrid landscapes (Demska 2019). Linguistic landscapes serve as a tool for marking the geographical locations of the present communities of practice (Landry and Bourhis 1997). Franz Cumont, a Belgian classicist, piloted the idea of syncretism in 1906: namely that no cultures are pure but mixed (Burke 2012) and as languages and cultures are not mutually exclusive, languages cannot be said to be *pure* either. Demska argues that “the lexicon of any language is always hybrid, created by native and alien elements; furthermore, natural language is the product of this hybridisation, the end point of this process” (Demska 2019, 3). This is due to invasions, changes in countries’ borders, trade, and the process of hybridisation and language flux is now accelerated by the use of the internet and globalisation. “The linguistic picture painted by all of these signs depends on the time and place; on the history of the region, state and city; on cultural and language policies; on the type (official, commercial, private); and on the values, education, native language and bi-/multilingualism (or lack of) of the author (Demska 2019, 2).”

International Movements

Several international movements have been referenced both online and in the streets. The main movements have originated from or are closely linked to English-speaking countries. In 2018, alongside the *gilets jaunes* protests, a parallel march took place where thousands of people in Bordeaux walked around the city centre protesting the lack of progress fighting climate change. Although veganism and the battle against climate change do not originate from English-speaking countries, they do benefit from publicity and support by prominent English-speaking celebrities and scientists. Similarly, the issues surrounding climate change and protecting the environment are by no means restricted to English-speaking countries. However, as these countries are heavily involved in these movements, the movements are therefore linked to the *lingua franca* used in those countries, which, in this and many cases, is English.

In 2020, following the ease of lockdown, people gathered in the streets of Bordeaux to support their Northern American counterparts protesting in support of the Black Lives Matter movement. This movement began in the United States of America in 2013 after the death of Trayvon Martin but has been more prominent since May 2020 following the death of George Floyd in Minneapolis (Black Lives Matter n.d.).



Fig. 5-Example of climate change graffiti found in Bordeaux, photograph taken by the author in 2019.

Finally, feminist pictorial art and urban inscriptions can be found all over the city of Bordeaux, telling the story of sexual abuse of women (fig. 7 and 8). Women's rights have been debated for many years in many countries, however, focus has recently turned to the instances of sexual abuse that are accepted by society. This was brought to the world's attention after several Hollywood actors were accused of inappropriate behaviour with female colleagues. This in turn launched the social media campaign #metoo and the French equivalent #balancetonporc ('Me Too. Movement' n.d.) (Translation: #SquealOnYourPig) and following that feminists took to the streets to continue the fight for change.

The outcome of the presence of these issues in French people's political agenda was mirrored by the appearance of related graffiti and street art. The manifestation of these international issues is evidence that the writers and artists wish to express discontent for not only local but also global issues.

Data

Fifty-nine urban inscriptions were selected for this study. I have classified the forms of *jaytalking* into three main areas: graffiti, tag, and pictorial art. The bar chart (fig. 9) shows that most of the rebellious inscriptions were classified as graffiti (52 instances) followed by pictorial art (5 instances) then tags (2 instances).



Fig. 6-Example of black lives matters graffiti found in Talence, France photograph taken by L. Graham in 2020.



Fig. 7 and 8- Example of feminist graffiti found in Talence and pictorial art found in Bordeaux, France. Photographs taken by L. Graham and Y. Seetahul (2020).

Next, I classified the inscriptions according to their overall theme. The main theme found in this corpus was rebellious language in general and national politics, these themes were closely followed by COVID-19 inspired graffiti, (fig. 10).

The inscriptions were also categorised by their language use. The community of global English-speaking graffiti writers and street artists also affects the identities of the local street artists and graffiti writers. The majority of the rebellious urban instances found in Bordeaux were written in English (43 phrases), followed by eight phrases which

Jaytalking forms

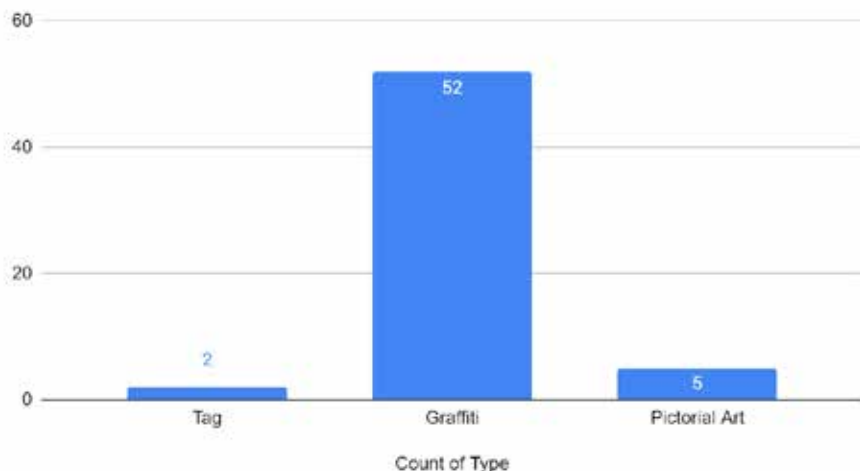


Fig. 9-Classification of the urban inscriptions, graph created by the author

Frequency of Themes

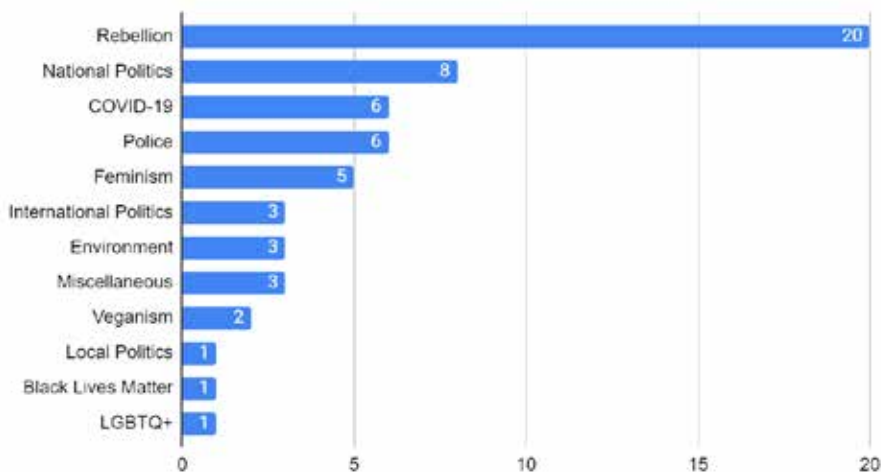


Fig. 10-Graph showing the themes present in the urban inscriptions, graph created by the author

17	7	4	4	4
FUCK	ARE	ACAB	BEAUTIFUL	LE
4	3	3	3	3
ALL	CLITORIS	LA	YOU	THE

Fig.11-Table of repeated words, table created by the author

The F Word

Fuck was the most popular English word, (English or otherwise) in this study. There are seventeen instances in which the “f” word was used. Seven of them rebel against authority, seven are used with no specific target, *fuck* is used twice referring to sexism and once as word play. The first image was found at the University Bordeaux Montaigne, the humanities university in Bordeaux, (fig. 13). Originally it was graffiti that supported the far-right, signalling a desire for France to leave the European Union. This is evident in the words “Frexit” (French exit – copying the style of Brexit), the European Union flag which has been crossed out, the prominent “Fuck UE”, and the two lilies, which are symbols of French royalty. However, this inscription has been altered by another graffiti writer. The second author has altered the message to read “FUCK AF”, which could be interpreted as Action Française (French Action = a royalist, far-right political party). They also crossed out the royalist symbols and added the words “ouin ouin”. “Ouin” does not feature in the French dictionary and so it is complicated to identify its true meaning. After asking several French speakers, I have discovered several possible meanings. Ouin ouin is used as a Swiss name for a funny person, as well as being used to refer to the people who live in Geneva. However, the most likely answer is that it is the onomatopoeic form for the sound of a baby’s cry and therefore insinuating that the original artist is behaving like a child.



Fig. 13-Anti-European Union Graffiti, taken by the author, Pessac (2018)

The next inscription of interest is also classified as a hybrid phrase, (fig. 14). It contains English, French, and a number. The number is in reference to the French police (in France if you call 117 you are connected to the police). There is also an extension of this graffiti by another artist, this time a play on the word *fuck* which is phonetically close to the word *phoque*, which is French for seal. To illustrate this, the artist has drawn a seal, and a third writer has named the seal George. A fourth writer has written *savez les* (save the) above *fuck*. The writer is probably referring to seals as grammatically it should read *savez le* if they wished to save the police. Four asynchronous interactions complete this inscription, which is once again testament to the sense of community between writers and artists.



Fig. 14-Hybrid play on words, photograph taken by the author, Bordeaux (2018)

The next hybrid phrase follows the commonly seen structure of using *fuck* in English and following it with the topic of discontent in French, (fig. 15). In this example, the writer is not happy about the *cistème*. This is a hybrid using the French words *cisgenre* and *système* (cisgender and system). Cisgender means that the gender identity of the individual corresponds with the sex that the person was identified as at birth (Merriam-Webster 2020). *Cis* is pronounced the same as *sys* in French and therefore the writer is able to create a hybrid word criticising society and supporting transgender people.



Fig. 15-French play on words, photograph taken by the author, Bordeaux (2018)

The final example containing the “f” word contains three of the instances used in this study, (fig. 16). These shop front shutters display a critique of society, a personal message from one writer, a message of love from another, a rejection of that love, and the acronym ACAB. The acronym ACAB started in the United Kingdom in the 1940s, meaning “All Coppers Are Bastards”. Then, in 2018, ACAB returned to the public eye, this time resurging in the United States of America following numerous instances of police brutality. The phrase can now be understood as “All Cops Are Bastards”, or “All Cops Are Bad” (Groundwater 2020). This writer in particular has also written ACAB in numerical form

1312, where the letters are replaced by the corresponding numbers. Therefore, this writer is either an avid supporter of the ACAB movement or very interested in it.

ACAB

From the 1940s to present day, ACAB has changed both around the issue of police brutality and also outside of it. There are many instances of ACAB around France, I have documented ACAB inscriptions in Paris, Seignosse, Marseille, and Arles. Presently, I have only seen instances of the evolution of ACAB in Bordeaux. There are two instances of ACAB being linked to a feminist movement in Bordeaux, (fig. 17), where the acronym now reads ALL CLITORIS ARE BEAUTIFUL. It is not clear in the photograph if ACAB was written first and then altered by a second author, or if just one author wished to link both movements together. ACAB has not only been appropriated by a feminist movement, but has also been adapted and reused as part of another message: ALL COLOURS ARE BEAUTIFUL (fig. 18). This banner could be referring to Black Lives Matter and different colours of skin. It could also be in support of graffiti writers and street artists who use colour in their artwork.



Fig. 16-Various inscriptions in English, photograph taken by the author, Bordeaux (2018)



Fig. 17 and 18-Evolution of ACAB, photographs taken by the author, Pessac and Merignac (2020)

A Critique of the Gilets Jaunes Protests

As mentioned earlier, Bordeaux was a pivotal city during the *gilets jaunes* protests. The government underestimated the extent to which people would protest in Bordeaux and sent the police to other cities. This resulted in substantial amounts of vandalism, street blockades, traffic disruption and chaos. After six months of large scale protests every Saturday in the city centre, the local population in Bordeaux started to sympathise less and less with the movement, (fig. 19 and 20). As *jaytalking* is anonymous it is impossible to know if this an English-speaking resident of Bordeaux expressing discontent with the protests or a French speaker that wishes to align themselves with the English-speaking community rather than the protesting French community. What is clear is that the speaker uses American English using the word “asshole” instead of the British variant “arsehole”. Judging by the formation of the letters it could be argued that these two inscriptions were not necessarily written by the same person. Either, the same person rewrote this message in more than one location which could be considered testimony to their frustration, or a second person was also criticising the protests through graffiti.



Fig. 19 and 20-Criticising the Gilets Jaunes Protests, photographs taken by the author Bordeaux (2020)

No Rules

This example of *jaytalking* is classified as pictorial art as it is more of a painting than a piece of writing, (fig. 21). What makes this example of pictorial art interesting is that it is in the suburbs of Bordeaux, not the cosmopolitan city centre. This shows that the use of English is widespread in this area and not restricted to the student frequented city centre.



Fig. 21-Pictorial Art in the Suburbs, Photograph taken by the author, Gradignan (2020)

Go Vegan

The next examples were also found in the suburbs surrounding Bordeaux, (fig. 22 and 23). Once again this proves that the use of English is not restricted to the city centre. Bordeaux is a rich city with lots of students and is known for its “hipster” feel. There are more and more vegetarian and vegan restaurants opening up and therefore, the vegan movement is in keeping with the values of the city. Nevertheless, it is impossible to know if the writers were native English-speakers or if they were writing in English to appeal to a wider audience, be trendy, or to link to the global food crisis – to which veganism is a solution. The first inscription to be written on this road was “GO VEGAN!” this was followed about six months later by the second phrase “EAT PUSSY NOT ANIMALS!”. Given the way in which the letters have been formed, it can be deduced that it was a

different writer, but it can be assumed that the second writer saw the first inscription and decided to respond in solidarity. This echoes tag community behaviour, whereby taggers leave their mark around other tags in order to indicate that they have also been in the area.



Fig. 22 and 23- Messages in the Suburbs, photographs taken by the author, Villenave d’Ornon (2019 and 2020)

From the data in this present study, graffiti in English can be understood as an extra element of rebellion when *jaytalking*. The writers and artists choose to align themselves with the English-speaking world instead of the French-speaking one that they geographically reside in. This may be because they move in English-speaking communities virtually and/or physically or associate more with the English-speaking movement or value that they wish to express. For example, in 1994 the French government imposed a law on French radio stations. This law requires the stations to play French music at least 40% of the time. When young French people

continue to listen to English music and use more and more English in their speech, art, and writing, it can be seen as a way of rebelling against these restrictions.

Jaytalking is a physical representation of how artists and writers view themselves and consequently their self-identity. The choice of location, size, colour, content, and language are all important to the writers. Especially when it is their tag and therefore chosen signature. Consequently, when writers choose to write in English, they align themselves within the global community of English-speakers and also separate themselves from the French-speaking status-quo. This is particularly noticeable when the writers leave the words: "Love A" meaning "love anarchy" in English in a French city (fig. 24). I have also found a variant on the normal usage of the anarchy symbol whereby the writer has combined the words "anarchy" and "artist" to form the hybrid word: *anartist* (fig. 25).

Examples of hybrid language usage is the most prominent type of rebellious language. I suggest that the artists and writers are using words and phrases that are present in their everyday vernacular, such as the word *fuck*. The artists and writers do not seek to use an English word to

change their message, that word, albeit of English origin, has become a part of this speaker's personal vocabulary. Most phrases being written completely in English refer to international social movements that either originated or have strong links to English-speaking countries. The main international movements being referenced in the streets of Bordeaux were Black Lives Matter and Feminism. The data from the urban inscriptions shows that international movements tend to use the lingua-franca, English, for their communication even within a country such as France where English is not an official language.

Conclusion

Jaytalking allows researchers an insight into "unabashed self-expression"; it gives the writer the freedom to comment on topics that are normally considered taboo due to its anonymous nature (Ball 2019, 1; Gonos, Mulkern, and Poushinsky 1976) and is therefore the perfect medium through which to rebel against authorities. *Jaytalking* is omnipresent and is a "symbolic phenomenon present on a variety of surfaces in any city of any size." (D. D. Gross and Gross 2016, 342). This study confirms this presence



Fig. 24 and 25-Anarchy in the streets, photographs taken by the author, Bordeaux (2019)

in Bordeaux, due to the amplitude of examples found in and around the city centre. As the present study consisted of anonymous graffiti writers and street artists, careful attention was given not to make assumptions about their identities. The results showed that urban inscriptions in France often included English words, but more often than not, the swearword *fuck*. This is not proof of bilingualism, identity or language ability, only proof of the linguistic choice made by that writer in that particular instance. The motivation to write comes above and beyond the reasons behind language choice despite the cognitive process required. This study therefore reveals that the linguistic choices made when *jaytalking* are a key part of the writer's identity. Therefore, the hybrid phrases containing both French and English are proof that the English language is becoming a part of French identity.

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