

# THE SONG-OBJECT BETWEEN THEORY AND PRACTICE: DIACHRONIC, GEOGRAPHIC, AND CULTURAL VARIATION\*

**Teori ve Pratik Arasındaki Bir Nesne Olarak Şarkı:  
Art Zamanlı, Coğrafik ve Kültürel Çeşitlemeler**

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## ABSTRACT

This article presents several aspects of research published over the course of the past several years considering both problems linked to different ways of referring to song-objects in French language and problems of referential quasi-equivalence of song genres from one language to another considered from an interlectual perspective. The variety of terms discussed form part of a diachronic movement illustrating the interpenetration of languages and song types over the course of centuries. Few problems are analysed, among others: the borrowings between signed songs and traditional songs, the heterogeneity of the corpus of song-objets and how it is reflected in the dictionaries. Those familiar with my previous works published in French will recognize some elements of reflexions presented already in books such as *Vers une théorie des objets-chansons* or *Chanson, son histoire et sa famille dans les dictionnaires de langues française, Etude lexicale, historique et théorique*. This short contribution will allow anglophon readers to get used with some of my concepts in such a way that my lexical contribution to the study of song-objet progressively enters in the practices. This will serve not only the musicologists, but also linguists, philologist and those who are generally concerns with the problem we met in the terminological description of a scientific activity diachronically.

## Keywords

Song, intercultural studies, musical terminology, lexicography, poetry (history)

## ÖZ

Makalede son yıllarda yaptığımız araştırmaların değişik görünülerinin bir sunumunu yapıyoruz ; örneğin bir nesne olarak şarkıya gönderme yaparak, şarkı türünün bir dilden ötekine türselliği bakımından denkliklerini bir söylem biçiminin ötekinden nasıl yararlandığı görüngüsünde ele alıyoruz. Tartışmaya açılan terimlerdeki çeşitlilik artsüremsel bir devinime bağlı olarak değişik dillerin ve şarkı türlerinin yüzyıllar boyunca iç içeliği ele alınacaktır. Çözömlenen sorunların kimileri şunlardır : belirtilen şarkılar yanında geleneksel şarkıların aralarındaki alışverişler, şarkılar bütüncesinde beliren ayrışıklık özelliği, söz konusu ayrışıklığın sözlüklerde tanımlanma biçimleri vb. Daha önce bu konuda yapılan çalışmalarla içli dışlı olanlar *Vers une Théorie des objets-chansons* ou *Chanson, son histoire et sa famille dans les dictionnaires de langue française, Etude lexicale, historique et théorique* adlı kitap çalışmalarında öne çıkarıp tartıştığımız konulardan haberliler. Şarkıların birer nesne olarak sözlüksel alanına katkı yapmaya yönelik bu çalışma gitgide kursamsal uygulamalara dahil olacaktır. Bu yaklaşım müzikbilimle uğraşanlar dışında dilbilim, filoloji ile uğraşanlara da katkı sağlayacaktır. Özellikle artsüremsel bir görüngüde bilimsel aktiviteler içerisinde olanlar için terminolojik betimlemelere bağlı olarak ortaya çıkan sorunlara ilgi duyanlara da katkı sağlamayı amaçlamaktadır.

## Anahtar Kelimeler

Şarkı, kültürlerarası çalışmalar, müzikal terimler, sözlükbilim,şiir (tarih)

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## 1. Introduction

Both the lexical unit, song (*chanson*), and the objects it names have undergone transformation over the course of time given that both the definition of the song-object—(its literary value recognized through examples of legitimation—in short, its literariness), and its referent, have been simultaneously modified according to changing historical context. Thus we can speak of a modification in the very conceptualization of the referent, in this case, of the song-object (which will be defined in due course), or even of the mobility of the concept despite its *denominative stability*, to use the term of the semiotician Leo Spitzer.<sup>1</sup> This conceptual movement, this *opera in movimento* (Eco: 1962) will serve as the basis for our approach to the *chansonnier* phenomenon, an approach focussing on the elements of the construction of meaning rather than on the fixed description of a signified.<sup>2</sup>

## 2. Problems of genre eclecticism and practices at the heart of hybridity

In one chapter of my work, *Vers une théorie des objets-chansons* (Editions ENS 2010), I showed that the phenomenon of borrowings by signed songs from songs coming from oral tradition and vice-versa is an acknowledged fact and something that occurs fairly frequently. Borrowings of fragments were analyzed as a function of a typology that considered both the linguistic and musical lineages of the song-object notwithstanding the question of song genres and contexts of dissemination. Since the practices of hybridity serve to modify song-objects, we felt it useful to create a terminology where each borrowing instance from

one of the two components to another is referred to by a specific term. This generic variation of song-objects leads to modifications in the very definition of the song, be it in dictionaries or in theoretical works.

These forms of eclecticism and hybridity carry consequences with them and are related as well to ethnomusicological method, as Laurent Aubert discusses in his “*Entre les deux pôles que représentent l’ethnomusicologie d’urgence*” found in the proceedings of the colloquium “*Migrants: craintes et espoirs, 18e Carrefour de la pensée, 14-17 March 2008*,” discussed as well by Gilbert Rouget.<sup>3</sup> This trend, the *ethnomusicology of change*, is focused on the study of recent phenomena, including those arising from different forms of syncretism and hybridity that are the result of the “meeting of cultures.” Today it has become a matter of rethinking the discipline’s object in terms of the parameters and new issues it is subject to.<sup>4</sup>

## 3. Traductology and interlexical variation

Tackling the question of song-objects allows us to observe different objects named by multiple and various lexemes. Lexical variation at the heart of the *song*’s word family was the subject of another work of mine published in 2010 as *Chanson, son histoire et sa famille dans les dictionnaires de langue française* [*Song: Its History and Its Family in French-language Dictionaries*]. We have verified, for example, *chansonnier* (noun and adjective), *chansonner* and *chansonnette* as being the most frequent as well as an entire series of more or less idiolexical usages where the frequency has varied over time. In this way, dictionary-

type reading lends itself to a kind of thematic reading style, organized in a lexical and semantic field that includes an attempt at historicization, one that retraces the path of words and ideas.<sup>5</sup> Unlike other kinds of lexical units, such as connectors, the study of the sign *song* must be linked to the evolution of the study of the genre, considered both in terms of the sociology of literature and culture, as well as in terms of interpretive semantics and as a “literary fact.”

The major French-language dictionaries retain two significant vocal practices that have defined French *chansonnière* culture: (1) the modern contemporary song, often characterized as satirical,<sup>6</sup> and (2) the medieval lyric, which generally assumes the existence of *troubadours* and *trouvères*. We should mention in particular the borrowing in some German works of numerous terms from the lexical field of *chanson*: *chanson* (at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century), *variétés*, *couplet*, etc.<sup>7</sup> and inversely the presence of the word *lied* in French, which is very frequent, as is the word *songs* in English to refer to what are not actually songs but rather *lieder*.

It should not be thought, however, that the fate of the lexicon of *chansonnière* culture has left more marks in French culture than in the cultures it has influenced. A glance at the *Diccionari de la llengua Catalana* published by the Institut d'Estudis Catalans (1995) provides us with an example of the productive adaptability of words in the *cançó* family in current usage in Catalan (*cançó*, *cançonaire*, *cançonner*, *cançonnerament*, *cançoneria*, *cançoneta*, *cançonetista*). This can be explained by the fact that some of these have been

translated by using words from the *chanteur* family as is the case in Italian. Note that in Italian one also finds *canzonettistico*, which is the same as the French adjective *chansonnier* and which can be explained because the word is both from the same grammatical category and presents as well an eloquent context in which one substitutes for *chansonnier* the partitive article *de la* and the word *chanson*: “le festival de la chanson.” Despite some difficulties encountered in the comparison of *chanson* derivatives in other languages, it remains the case that since the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century the lexicon has filtered out some derived words that occasionally appear in foreign language dictionaries as we have seen above.

#### 4. Types of variation

In terms of methodology, we have noted the problem of the limitations of a corpus; the problem of the homogeneity of the corpus (metalinguistic as well as linguistic) is also obvious. The problem of the heterogeneity of any corpus is similar to that which one finds in all survey work, particularly when using an historical method that attempts to retrace the collective memory of a specific time period and when one is thus subject to the difficult task of evaluating sources. There are three types of heterogeneity to consider: (1) *stylistic* heterogeneity (level of language, literary type); (2) *geographic* heterogeneity; and (3) *diachronic* heterogeneity. These are the three principal variations (we will consider the question of duration later on) that one observes in the framework of *chansonnière* activity in the analysis of its dual lineage, linguistic and musical. In this area, the choice of an idiolect is always

an imperfect response to the criterion of homogeneity “since the language or the writing of the speaker is necessarily inscribed within duration: from which all variations this idiolectal diachrony derives.”<sup>8</sup> This observation leads me to mention the problems related to the study of vocabulary of a lost idiom. Geographic variation of vocal practices has already given rise to an entire group of works dating from Romanticism until the present time, at least in terms of what comes from the oral tradition corpus. This has elicited numerous hypotheses based on the collective or individual origin of songs from oral tradition. Obviously the site of the inquiry is also a critical variable to consider when editing a researcher’s research records. Gregorian semiology, very actively pursued at the Abbaye de Solesmes, showed great interest in the different versions of European manuscripts copied, photographed, and microfilmed at the time of corpus research undertaken at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. The selected version in Gregorian chant is called *the restitution* whereas the corpus from the oral tradition is called *the critical version*. Nevertheless, it is often a question of a line of dissemination or diffusion similar to the original, that is to say, that musical notation is often posterior to the practice of chanting.

##### **5. On the constraints of studying the vocabulary of a lost idiom**

We have raised above the question of diachronic variation. Consideration of past periods of French language both implies and justifies the existence of a corpus but theoretically limits the approach as well since knowledge does not rest on linguistic competence but rather on a purely abstract knowledge

of vocabulary. We know that the tendency to evaluate a lexicon diachronically different from our own in the light of our current linguistic competencies<sup>9</sup> carries hermeneutic unfairness with it. In the study of collections of ancient manuscripts, other problems appear. For example, the dating of ancient texts, in particular for texts prior to the 15<sup>th</sup> century, remains approximate at times. And the dating of digitized texts suggested by the *Trésor de la langue française* or by Frantext is often inaccurate. For example, it is necessary to refer to a diary entry to avoid citing a later publication date. Stylistic and geographic heterogeneity also increase problems related to the study of historically remote periods. As far as song-objects themselves, hybridities must now consider borrowing from song-objects or from ancient or lost vocal practices as is the case of Loco Locass or Mes Aïeux, who have grafted fragments of songs by Madame Bolduc, in that she is representative of influences within traditional music and the signed song.

##### **6. Song—text or chant?**

The problems previously discussed are primarily found in the Middle Ages. It is sufficient to note that the lexeme *chansonnier* in French used to refer to a collection of songs (1717) occurs much later than the appearance of the object itself to realize that the vocabulary used to describe the activity *chansonnière* is often insufficient. It is often a problem of the absence of available manuscripts for describing the *chansonnière* activity of the Middle Ages. Thus in studying the Middle Ages, Zumthor shows caution in his use of terminology, for example, by making explicit that the use of the

words *medieval literature* is unfair since many works were circulating at that time within a society of mixed orality, that is to say where “the influence of the written remains external.” In addition he asserts that “‘*orality*’ by itself is an abstraction; only the voice is concrete, only by listening to it can we touch things.”<sup>10</sup>

The absence of written evidence in a context where above all else one must consider a vocal piece as a literary fact poses a problem even after the Renaissance. Conversely the absence of evidence of vocalisation to characterize a song-object is also constraining. For example, the title *chanson* such as it appears in Canadian newspapers during the last third of the 19<sup>th</sup> century (in texts written by Adolphe Marsais and François-Xavier Garneau, for example), is derived from its medieval use, /piece in verse destined to be sung/ and /poetry/<sup>11</sup> and used as an umbrella term for a poetry of the time, one imbued with subjectivity, but for stylistic and technological reasons has little to do with the song of today. The poetry of the 19<sup>th</sup> century called or given the title of *chanson*, has not always left evidence of vocalisation, of having been made into song, if you will. Thus the generic use of *chanson* in the 19<sup>th</sup> century is not a new phenomenon, even though the practice of naming non-vocalized poems in this way was rather frequent during that time. In the absence of a score, it is the evidence of the voice, the “indications of orality,”<sup>12</sup> or vocalisation, which, like deictics in an utterance, will “show” the performance: *sur l’air de* [to the tune of], *sur un air connu* [to a well-known tune], *sur un air triste, rigolo* [a sad, amusing tune],

*bis* [repeat], *refrain* or even indications in the titles (*complainte* [lament]).<sup>13</sup> If one judges the lexicographical treatment that certainly evokes the ambiguity of the song-object, not only is the vocal destination of the poetic message optional, but the oral transmission is as well.<sup>14</sup>

In concluding we must review. Several methods of transformation, such as rearranging or adaptation, cause terminological problems, since duration, subject, and formal constraints are some of the characteristics that semantically ground *chanson* phenomena. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century if the text by itself can be called a song or *chanson*, numerous composers are also using the term to refer to musical genres that in appearance have nothing to do with sung poetry. In this case, the lexeme *chanson* achieves the status of both hyperonym and hyponym since its vocal character becomes aleatory. Furthermore, in the lexicon of the 16<sup>th</sup> and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries, but also well before, *chanson*, according to metalinguistic Latin sources I have consulted (Albert Blaise, Alfred Ernout and Antoine Meillet, etc.), a generic value. Thus for Robert Estienne (1539) it was a question of, among other things, /canticum/ as well as a /carmen/ while for Edmond Hugget in his *Dictionnaire de la langue française du XVI siècle*, it /could apply to everything written in verse/ and for Randle Cotgrave (1611) it constitutes an /ayre/, a /ballade/, a /pòeme/, a /discourse/, etc. The meaning is restricted in Trevoux’s dictionary, which gives only the lemmas *cantilena*, *canticum*, *cantio*, which are usually consigned to Latin dictionaries.

## 7. Variation of duration in vocal poetry

If the fact that a poem is not put to music does not necessarily prevent it from being considered a song, it is still the case that according to lexicographical tradition one considers the status of the song as supposedly being vocalized. Another of the semantic features inherent to the song-object is its *brevity*. We must also note that the duration of a vocal poem is equally relative. Even the dictionary definition describing the song as a short piece of verse is not exempt from detailed commentary. Notwithstanding the existence of medieval *laissez*, the duration of vocal pieces is also constrained by modern technology. In this way the appearance of 78 rpm and 33 rpm recordings fixed the duration of the song from between two-and-a-half to three minutes. It would perhaps be unfair to limit the explanation of the length/duration of a song solely to the technical constraints of sound recording since there are numerous songs from the 19<sup>th</sup> century of similar length. However, the advent of the wax cylinder and certainly the arrival of the 78 rpm record, contributed to the limitation of the length of songs intended for recording to about three minutes.<sup>15</sup> The arrival of the 33 rpm record in 1948 changed nothing about listening habits, which means that songs continued to be recorded at that length. The progressive rock song of the 1970s Anglo-Saxon groups like Yes (the group Harmonium could be considered among the francophone diaspora of the time) or Leo Ferré, in a genre a bit marginal in terms of radio format, musically inspired by the aesthetic of the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, produced relatively long texts

that underwent sweetenings and plural readings (indeed different interpretations) because interpreters shortened the text according to their tastes, their needs, or the ideology they were championing.<sup>16</sup> At least this was the way of doing things used by certain amateur French Canadian ethnologists, known for their sweetening of *chansonnier* texts from oral tradition (in particular Abbé François-Xavier Burque and Abbé Charles-Émile Gadbois).

Moreover, the duration of the song was not always limited to needs imposed by the record industry. It is the case of lyrical *laissez* of the Middle Ages that we have mentioned, whose long strophes underwent revision and alteration, giving them a great amplification (the procedure of *grafting*)<sup>17</sup>, particularly at the end of the 12<sup>th</sup> century<sup>18</sup>. Jean-Marcel Paquette argues that in the wake of “the adaptation in prose (14<sup>th</sup>, 15<sup>th</sup>, 16<sup>th</sup>, and 17<sup>th</sup> centuries), given the fact of the elimination of the *laisse*, [such adaptations] can no longer carry the name of *chanson de geste*.” He adds that one sometimes gives them the name of *épopée* (epic) [this is the term used for them by Jean-Baptiste Weckerlin]<sup>19</sup> and takes care to clarify that “the adjective *épique* can serve, nonetheless, to describe certain characteristics common to the entire genre. Thus *La Prise d’Orange* or *La Chevalerie Vivien* [c. 1180] clearly possess epic features but should not for all that be considered epics.”<sup>20</sup>

## 8. Conclusion

In examining the poetic quality and the musicality of the song’s components, we need to consider the problem of dual lineage in a new light. Paul Wycznski emphasizes: “There is music

in the poems of Verlaine and Mallarmé, just as there is poetry in the sonatas of Beethoven and the nocturnes of Chopin.”<sup>21</sup> A little later he adds: “To surprise music in poems means to surprise within them the extensive creative power in which a verbal segment parts ways with articulations that belong to social language in order to join with the élan and suggestiveness of music.”<sup>22</sup> It is certainly a Verlainian poetic feeling that springs forth from the famous line that we must invoke here, “Music above all else,”<sup>23</sup> which became the motto of many Symbolist poets. Wyczynski devotes an essay to the musicality of Emile Nelligan’s poetry in which both phonetic characteristics and themes are manifestations of the musicality of the text, what Eustaches Deschamps calls this “natural music.” Some poems have been the subject of oral readings during which the texts are spoken against a background sound of violin or piano, according to Nelligan’s tastes. In the case where one “adds music to poetry,”<sup>24</sup> in the words of Hugo, we must consider the song-object as doubly musical, both in the musicality of the verbal phrase as well as in the presence of the musical component itself. During a discussion on French poetry in Balzac’s novel, *Les Illusions perdues*, Adrien says that “the song proves that our language is very musical.”<sup>25</sup>

Notwithstanding the eclectic dimension organizing the song-object into a sung whole, we must not forget that vocal practices today are affected more than ever by time, by the infrastructure that distributes them, and by foreign cultures. To time, space, and duration are added variables linked to the support of distribution,

the musical capacities of the composer and the writer, the musical competencies of the performers, who at times are more subjected to the text than to learning the oral tradition of a specific period. In summary, the song-object is assessed, organized and interpreted in multiple ways.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 See Heike Hülzer, 1993, p. [131]-151. Nickées explains the phenomenon in these terms: “It can happen that the noun remains the same even though the reality to which it refers has changed” (Vincent Nickées 1998: p. 107). I have explained in an article on *hyperterminotique* (2000) why the use of the word *reality* does not seem appropriate here.
- 2 We refer here to the distinction made by François Gaudin between *signifié* and concept, which is further discussed in Myriam Bouveret, 1966: p. 261.
- 3 See in particular his interview with Véronique Mortaigne published in *Le Monde*, 30 September 1997, cited by Laurent Aubert, 2009 and 2011: p. 88.
- 4 Laurent Aubert, 2009.
- 5 See André Collinot and Francine Mazière, 1997: p. [1].
- 6 A. Della Corte and G.M. Gatti, 1952: p. 121.
- 7 See Wolfgang Victor Rutkowski in R. Escarpit, 1984: p. 234.
- 8 G. Kleiber, 1978: p. 67.
- 9 See G. Kleiber, 1978: p. 74.
- 10 In italics in the original text. See P. Zumthor, 1987b): p. 9.
- 11 See s.v. *chanson* in DHLF, p. 388.
- 12 Zumthor, 1987b): p. 37.
- 13 See Maurice Lemire, 1991: p. 338.
- 14 The consultation of several Catalan dictionaries shows on the contrary that the composition in verse is meant to be sung: see [Societat de Catalans], 1839; Pompeu Fabra, 1974: p. 312.
- 15 See P. Zumthor, 1987a): p. 14.
- 16 See François-Xavier Burque, 1907: p. 2.
- 17 Conrad Laforte points out that it is a question of the soldering of two songs to form one (1981): p. [11]).
- 18 Zumthor, 2000: p. 546.
- 19 1886: p. III.
- 20 In Robert Escarpit, 1984: p. 263.
- 21 1971: p. 10.
- 22 P. Wyczynski, 1971: p. 14.

- 23 From "L'Art poétique" (1874) in the collection *Jadis et naguère* (1884).
- 24 This oft-cited phrase originated, according to Hugo specialists, probably from one of Hugo's critics rather than from Hugo himself.
- 25 1837 in 1843: p. 202.

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