Gender Dis-agreement: Reactions to Proposals for Gender-Inclusive and Gender-Neutral Language in France and Quebec

by

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Abstract: This article summarizes linguistic reforms that have been proposed to make the French language more gender-inclusive (or perhaps even more gender-neutral) and offer some explanations for the somewhat different reactions to these proposed reforms in France and Quebec. Calls for "gender inclusivity" and "gender neutrality" are not the same thing. In fact, the two terms may even be understood in opposition to one another, with "gender neutrality" aiming to remove gender markers from language and "gender inclusivity" calling for both feminine and masculine forms of words to be explicitly mentioned. In English-speaking countries, the focus has been primarily on "gender neutrality", while in France and Quebec, it has been almost entirely about "gender inclusivity". Whether attempts to make a given language more gender inclusive or gender neutral succeed or fail clearly has a lot to do with the specific grammatical features of that language that would make gender inclusivity/neutrality more or less difficult. However, as this comparison of the reactions to proposed language reforms in Quebec and France demonstrates, grammatical features are not the sole determiner of what is possible; broader social forces play a role as well.

In this article, I summarize various linguistic reforms that have been proposed to make the French language more gender-inclusive (or perhaps even more gender-neutral) and offer some reasons for the somewhat different reactions to these proposed reforms in France and Quebec.

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(as opposed to using the masculine form of a word as the universal). In English-speaking countries, the focus has been primarily on gender neutrality, while in France and Quebec, it has been almost entirely about gender inclusivity. An example is the call for the "*féminisation*" of career titles in France (creating new feminine forms of career titles that only have masculine forms, because the job has been traditionally performed by men), while in the United States the move has been toward finding neutral terms for various professions (such as "flight attendant", "fire fighter", etc.) or toward eliminating the feminine form and using the masculine form as the universal (eliminating the term "actress" and using "actor" for both men and women). Gender markers are everywhere in a grammatically gendered language like French; they appear in adjectival endings, in noun endings, in pronouns, in participle endings, and in definite/indefinite articles. Consequently, the question of gender inclusivity is not a binary one (inclusive or not inclusive) but rather is about how broadly the principle of gender inclusivity should be applied. Some may choose just to apply it to nouns referring to professions, others may also apply it to adjectives, etc.

Every French speaker is implicated in one way or another, since every time someone speaks or writes, they must choose whether to use gender-inclusive language or not. Consequently, it is not surprising to see the attention that polemics around gender inclusivity have received in recent years. New online tools, such as "*IncluZor·e*", have appeared to help people check for lapses in gender-inclusivity in their writing and Microsoft recently added tools in the French version of its operating system to check for gender inclusivity. There are even tools for those with a strong aversion to gender-inclusive language, including add-ons for web browsers, such as "*Blocut*", that will convert gender-inclusive language to non-gender inclusive language when browsing websites.

The first part of this article consists of an overview of the language reforms that have been proposed for the French language. Following this, I will discuss the responses to these various reforms in France and Quebec and offer explanations for the somewhat different reactions to the proposed reforms in those two places.

The language reforms for French fall into three categories, which correspond more or less to three successive historical phases. The first category involves the creation of new feminine forms for career titles that previously had none because those professions had traditionally been occupied by men. This "feminization" of professions can be traced back to the 1980s, if not before, and most, but not all, of the new feminine forms have entered into common usage. Indeed in 2019, even the conservative *Académie française* announced its approval of the newly coined feminine job titles, after opposing their use for three decades (Rérolle 2019).

The second category is frequently referred to as "inclusive writing". It is a relatively recent development, with the term "écriture inclusive" first appearing in the popular press in February 2017[1]. It consists of a series of guidelines aimed at ending the invisibility of women and the dominance of the masculine form in French through gender inclusivity, which involves systematically including both feminine

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[1] In a Nexis Uni search of the term "écriture inclusive", the earliest use of the term was in an article from *Le Figaro* on February 22, 2017 (Beyer 2017).

and masculine forms of words when referring to people. There are a number of ways to achieve this, but one increasingly common practice today is to use a "*point médian*" (a dot located at the midline position of the text) between the masculine form and the feminine suffix. For example, the masculine form for the word student, *étudiant*, and the feminine form, *étudiante*, can be combined in writing as "étudiant·e"[2]. It is not entirely obvious how words with this point median form should be pronounced, though the most common practice is to utter both forms (i.e., to say "*un étudiant ou une étudiante*") when speaking. Another revision to grammar rules that *écriture inclusive* calls for relates to the agreement of adjectives when they are used to modify more than one noun. Traditionally, when an adjective modifies more than one noun, it takes the masculine plural form if even just one of the nouns is masculine; the feminine plural form is used only when all the nouns are feminine. As many historians have pointed out, this was not always the case. In fact, in the seventeenth century the adjective simply agreed with whatever noun it was closest to (the so-called "rule of proximity"). This rule was progressively replaced with the current practice beginning in the late seventeenth century, though some grammar books continued to include the rule of proximity as late as the early twentieth century (Manesse and Siouffi 2019: 112-113). The practitioners of *écriture inclusive* advocate a return to the rule of the proximity. Finally, there is one recommendation offered by *écriture inclusive* guides that is not about including masculine and feminine forms, but about using existing gender-neutral (or "*épicène*") terms whenever possible. One way to do this is by replacing words like "manager" that have masculine and feminine forms (*directeur/directrice*) with collective nouns like "management" (*la direction*). Another is to opt for terms for people that have identical masculine and feminine forms (*artiste/artiste*). One final tendency that has begun to appear with growing frequency in informal communication – though it is not advocated by any of the more formal guides for *écriture inclusive* – is to use the masculine form of the word and to change just the gender of the article (e.g., *un chef/une chef* rather than *un chef/une cheffe*) (Gardelle 2019: 174).

The third and most recent category for language reform aims at increased gender neutrality by reducing gender markers in French primarily through the use of new gender-neutral personal pronouns[3]. These efforts have proved to be the most challenging and controversial. So far on that front, proposals have been more or less limited to replacing the subject pronouns "*il*" (he) and "*elle*" (she) with a newly coined gender-neutral pronoun. Though this linguistic practice remains much less common in French than say, the use of "they" as a gender-neutral pronoun in English, it does seem to be gaining some traction, with the most commonly proposed

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[2] The example of "*étudiant*" is a simple one, but there are words with feminine forms that do not involve merely adding an "e," which add some complications to the proposed reforms. For example, "*acteurs*" and "*actrices*" (in English, "actors") form "*acteur·ice·s*," and "*ceux*" and "*celles*" (in English, "these") form "*ceux·elles*". For a more detailed explanation of the various rules, consult (Haddad 2019) It can be downloaded for free at https://www.motscles.net/ecriture-inclusive.

[3] In a Nexis Uni search, references to gender-neutral pronouns in French first appeared in October, 2017, beginning with an October 5, 2017 article in *Le Figaro*: (Pech 2017).

option being the neologism "*iel*"[4]. Of course, just swapping pronouns leaves open the question of how to handle gender agreement for adjectives, past participles, and definite/indefinite articles. Does one choose between masculine and feminine forms or try to come up with new gender-neutral forms? As this proposal for endings shown in the chart below shows, things can get complicated quickly[5]. The general rule with this proposal is that a final "e" in the feminine form should be replaced with an "x" to create a neutral form ("*principale*" becomes "*principalx*"), unless the word has one of the feminine endings listed below

Feminine endings	Gender-neutral endings	Examples
-de *-que* *-se* *-te* *-ve*	*-x*	*pronfonde* → *profonx* *publique* → *publix* *française* → *françaix* *agente* → *agenx* *active* → *actix*
-aine *-enne*	*-an*	*certaine* → *certan* *citoyenne* → *citoyan*
-ée	*-œ*	*députée* → *députœ*
-elle	*-œl*	*professionelle* → *professionnœl*
-ice	*-aire*	*amatrice* → *amataire*
-euse	*-euz*	*heureuse* → *heureuz*
-ine	*-aine*	*voisine* → *voisaine*
-agne	*-aign*	*compagne* → *compaign*
-eille	*-ial*	*vieille* → *vial*
Some specific cases: belle → *bial* or *béal, nouvelle* → *nouval, reine* → *rial, heroine* → *hérox, déesse* → *diex*		

Any language reform requires some effort on the part of speakers, something that the linguist Laure Gardelle refers to as the "cognitive cost" of linguistic intervention (Gardelle 2019: 161). There is, for example, a cognitive cost, albeit relatively small, of using "they" as a gender-neutral, third-person-singular subject pronoun in English, however, it is clear from the above chart that that cost is significantly less than any method of producing gender-neutral language in French. The

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[4] In a survey of 309 people who identify as non-binary, 74.1% thought that if a dictionary were to include a gender-neutral pronoun, it should choose "*iel*". Other less common options include *ielle, yel, ol, olle, ul, ulle*, and *ille*. (LVEQ 2017)

[5] This particular proposal comes from the French linguist, Alpheratz: https://www.alpheratz.fr/linguistique/genre-neutre/. This is just one of several proposed ways of handling adjective endings. Another linguist, who goes by the name LVEQ, provides an alternative proposal here: LVEQ, "Petit dico de français neutre/inclusif", https://lavieenqueer.wordpress.com/2018/07/26/petit-dico-de-francais-neutre-inclusif.

notion of cognitive cost helps explain why there has been more discussion of making French more gender inclusive than of making French more gender neutral, since proposals for gender inclusivity all require much less mental effort than those aimed at gender neutrality.

Moreover, though French is like other Romance languages in that it is heavily gendered, the gender marking of words in French is somewhat different from gender marking in other Romance languages, which have specific suffixes that often indicate the word's gender. In Spanish for example, an "o" at the end of a word frequently signals the masculine, while an "a" usually indicates the feminine. In French, masculine forms are generally indicated by the *lack* of a suffix, while feminine forms often have an "e" added to the masculine form, giving the impression that the masculine form is the root or neutral form of the word. Consequently, it is not a matter of merely coming up with a new suffix that would signal gender neutrality (for example, substituting the final "o" or "a" in Spanish with an "x", as in the form "Latinx" or an "@" as in "*l@s amig@s*"), since adding a suffix on its own is associated with the feminine form. In the chart above, this tension is obvious, with some forms adding a suffix to the masculine "root" form and appearing perhaps a little feminine as a result (the masculine form of "*principal*" becomes "*principalx*"), and others replacing the end of the masculine "root" form and appearing a little more masculine (the masculine form "*certain*" becomes "*certan*"). Another important difference with French is that subject pronouns are not optional as they are in languages such as Spanish or Italian, which allow speakers to avoid stating the subject's gender simply by leaving out the subject pronoun. These differences indicate that the cognitive cost of producing gender neutral language, which would be already high for any Romance language, could be even slightly higher in French.

The various proposed reforms outlined above are the subject of polemics in both France and Quebec, though the discussions are not identical in the two places. In the sections below, I will briefly highlight some of the differences between the two contexts.

In France, debates over gender inclusivity began in earnest in fall 2017 when a textbook, made public by the *Manif pour tous* (a political organization originally created to protest against same-sex marriage), showed sentences from a textbook written with the *point médian*. The issue continues to be a recurring topic on television and radio debate programs, on the front covers of magazines, in newspaper editorials, in online forums, and in discussions at the *Académie française* (a revered institution whose mission since 1635 has been to establish clear rules for French usage). Ultimately, the Académie refused to legitimize gender-inclusive language and even went so far as to call it a "mortal danger" for the French language (L'Académie française 2017). Meanwhile in Quebec, calls for gender inclusivity began much earlier, as early as the 1980s, and have met significantly less resistance. In addition, suggestions for ways of achieving gender neutrality in French, while still marginal in both places, have received a bit more attention in Quebec than in France.

Though the *Académie française* has at last accepted the feminization of professional job titles, it has expressed clear opposition to *écriture inclusive*. It is not the

only organization participating in the debates, however. The *Haut conseil de l'égalité entre les femmes et les hommes* (the High Council for Equality between Women and Men), created in 2013 by a presidential decree from François Hollande to further the cause of gender equality in all areas, has taken a much more favorable position toward reforms aimed at linguistic gender inclusivity. A private consulting firm called *Mots Clés* has also played an active role in the debates and has produced widely distributed style guides for *écriture inclusive.* It should be noted, however, that the focus for both the *Haut Conseil* and *Mots Clés* has been entirely on the first two categories outlined above (feminization of professional titles and gender inclusivity). Neither has endorsed or even recognized proposals for gender neutrality.

In Quebec, like in France, the feminization of professional titles is now generally accepted. What is different, however, is that *gender-neutral* language through the use of new pronouns such as *iel*, while still relatively uncommon, has met with less resistance from language authorities. What most sets Quebec apart from France though has been that discussions of *gender inclusivity* have been happening for decades and have overall created significantly less controversy. The linguist Hélène Dumais, author of the guide of gender inclusivity in French for Quebec's Ministry of Education, explains that "the discussions that are currently taking place in France, we were having in the 1980s…It's progress. At least [the French] are questioning themselves, but it shows to what extent Quebec was at the leading edge" (Caillou 2017). While French-speaking Québecois do tend to heed the recommendations of France's *Académie française,* they also have their own governmental agencies that sometimes offer guidelines divergent from those of the *Académie*. The *Office québecois de la langue française* (Quebec Office of the French Language or OQLF) established in 1961, has generally been less conservative – with the exception of its concern over anglicisms – in its guidance for proper French usage than the *Académie française*. This is certainly the case in its endorsement of *écriture inclusive*; and though it does not go so far as to recommend using neologisms for gender-neutral pronouns, it does recognize their existence in its online collection of language how-tos (*banque de dépannage linguistique*) where it explains that a non-binary style may use "neologisms such as *iel*", but that "it should be noted that the use of these neologisms remains limited to 'gender-diverse' communities" (OQLF n.d.). The Canadian government's *Bureau de la traduction* (translation bureau) goes further than the OQLF in its support of strategies aimed at gender neutrality by offering recommendations for preserving gender neutrality when translating a gender-neutral text from English to French. In a 2019 report, it specifically mentions the following options: "neutral pronouns (for example: *iel, ille, al* and *ol* for the third-person singular), neutral articles (for example, *an* for *un/une*), modification of endings (for example, *autaire* for *auteur/autrice*), blended words (for example, *frœur* for *frère/sœur*), modification of agreements (for example, *heureuxe* for *heureux/heureuse*) (Gouvernement du Canada 2019).

In France, language is a fundamental component of national identity and language reform is serious business. The Minister of Culture, Jacques Toubon, explained in 1994 that for the French people, the French language "is their primary capital, the symbol of their dignity, the passageway to integration, the diapason of a

universal culture, a common heritage, part of the French dream" (Riding 1994). This link between French identity and the French language underlies a widespread linguistic conservatism that impedes language reform. Efforts over the years to simplify spelling, for example, have met fierce resistance. This is one factor that has stood in the way of linguistic gender inclusivity. Francophone Canadians' relationship to the French language is somewhat different. For the Québecois, there is a tension between reliance on France as a source of power in a country where Anglophones are a majority and the desire to assert independence from France's rigid linguistic policies. Québecois identity is a hybrid that relies on being both a citizen of the country of Canada and a member of a distinct Francophone minority. It is normal then for discussions about gender inclusivity and gender neutrality among Anglophone Canadians to spill over and influence parallel discussions among Francophones. Moreover, to the extent that the Canadian government aims to offer the same information in the French and English versions of its documents, the government's push for gender inclusivity and gender neutrality in English has created a need for gender-inclusive and/or gender-neutral options in French.

In France, the perceived naturalness of masculine and feminine gender roles has also played a role in opposition to linguistic gender inclusivity/neutrality. The notion of essential sexual difference runs deep in France even among some strands of French feminism, particularly those associated with the theoreticians Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous. The belief in essential sexual difference became acutely apparent in the summer of 2010, when it was announced that high school sex-ed textbooks would begin to discuss gender roles as "socially constructed" and 80 representatives from the National Assembly along with 113 senators – roughly a third of all senators – sent letters of protest to the Minister of Education. It is thus not surprising for opponents of gender-neutral language in France to highlight the risks of masking sexual difference. This already happened in 2013 when one of the most hotly contested elements in debates over same-sex marriage turned out to be the replacement of the words "father" and "mother" in the Civil Code with the word "parent" (ultimately, the words "father" and "mother" were preserved) (Laurent and Parienté 2013).

Another factor is the need for French public discourse to distance itself from anything perceived to be American, and in particular, American political correctness. As a number of recent works have pointed out, the use of "America" in France has generally been more of a rhetorical strategy than a reflection of reality, since "America" is a word that can be filled with many different meanings, or to borrow the terminology of Levi-Strauss: "America" is a floating signifier. With regard to the use of "America" in discussions of gender and sexuality in France, the French sociologist Eric Fassin has referred to the rhetorical strategy of the "American scarecrow," such that by associating one side of a debate with the "American position", it becomes impossible to agree with it without be suspected of betraying France. This is especially the case when discussing issues of gender or sexuality. Fassin explains that "in the same way that one could say in the United States that communism is 'un-American', in France, sexual politics seem 'un-French', to the benefit of diatribes against 'political correctness'" (Fassin 2003: 26). Opponents of reforms aimed at gender inclusivity/neutrality present them as American imports as

a means of discrediting them. Supporters of the reforms on the other hand are constantly on the defensive, having to claim that there is nothing American about their ideas. Meanwhile in Quebec, Francophone Canadian scholars have been more influenced by or at least open to the work of Anglophone North-Americans, and North-American feminist scholarship in particular, which explains why academic work on gender-inclusive/gender-neutral language options is more developed there than in France. Maurice Druon, former member of the *Académie française*, invoked the perilous influence of North American ideas in 2006 in his opposition to the "absurd feminizations" proposed in Quebec, which under the influence of "feminist leagues from the United States" supported "unrestrained feminization" ("Maurice Druon écorche le parler québécois" 2006). The influence of North American feminism in Quebec means that both the "American scarecrow", referred to above, as well as the essentialist notion of gender roles are less influential in Quebec than in France, presenting less of an obstacle to linguistic gender inclusivity. In conclusion, whether an attempt to make a given language more gender inclusive or gender neutral succeeds or fails has a lot to do with the specific grammatical features of that language that contribute to the cognitive cost of linguistic intervention. However, as this comparison of the reactions to proposed language reforms in Quebec and France demonstrates, grammatical features are not the sole determiner of what is possible; broader social forces play a role as well.

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