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The Challenges of Making French Gender-Inclusive: How to Stop Leaving the Non-Binary and Genderfluid Community Out of the Conversation

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Category: Long Analytical

“The Challenges of Making French Gender-Inclusive: How to Stop Leaving the Non-Binary and Genderfluid Community Out of the Conversation”

FYH-102- Queer Theory

Dr. Kiki Kosnick

Spring 2022

The Challenges of Making French Gender-Inclusive: How to Stop Leaving the Non-Binary and Genderfluid Community Out of the Conversation

Oftentimes, people may not think about why the current grammar structures of their languages exist. After all, once people are fluent in their languages, many choose to focus on the content of what they say or write instead of the grammar that they use to correctly express themselves. However, what if the structures set in place in the language do not allow you to fully express who you are? Nonbinary and genderfluid people in francophone countries are forced to grapple with this idea in their lives, since until recently in history, they needed to choose between using masculine or feminine pronouns because most French speakers did not know how to use gender-neutral language. Instead of being open to making adjustments to the French language to allow representation for those who do not identify with being male or female, French politicians in general have opposed change in the centuries-old language and have attempted to prevent gender-inclusive education from being taught in schools. Therefore, gender-inclusivity in the French language is being made mainstream at an extraordinarily slow pace because there is a lack of education for francophone citizens regarding the clear definition of inclusive language due to little to no support from politicians in France. The solution to making the French language more gender-inclusive at a quicker pace is to incorporate non-binary grammar early on in French education worldwide.

Inclusive writing, or *l'écriture inclusive* in French, consists of several components that work together to improve the structure of the language, although some aspects of inclusive writing still need to be improved. An important concept that should be known about French is that the language is gendered, where every noun either has *la* and *une*, the definite and indefinite articles respectively given to feminine nouns, or *le* and *un*, the articles that are attached to masculine nouns. The gendered format is fine when it comes to inanimate objects, since objects do not care about which gender category they get placed under. However, this

gendered structure gets more complicated when it comes to people because not everyone is able to express themselves with the binary gender form. The non-binary community has created several pronouns to express themselves, the most common of which is *iel*, a word that combines the male and female pronouns *il* and *elle*. Another way that the French can use to go around using gender to refer to someone is by using epicene words, which take the same form whether it refers to something feminine or masculine. A good example of an epicene word, taken from a blog for French learners, is saying “*les membres de la communauté étudiante*,” translating to members of the student community, instead of “*étudiants*” or “*étudiantes*” (Geay). Unlike the word *étudiant·e*, *membre* is the same no matter what gender the word is referring to, so it is a way to refer to a student without erasing their gender identity. Finally, the point between the t and e in the word *étudiant·e* is called a *point milieu*. According to a blog for French grammar, “*le point milieu est utilisé pour regrouper au sein d’un même mot les formes au masculin et au féminin*,” meaning that this mechanism is used to combine the masculine and feminine forms into one word (Bruno). Using the *point milieu* allows someone to refer to people without being forced to assume their genders. However, this form can cause issues in pronunciation; the word *étudiant·e*, for example, is actually unpronounceable. Pronouncing the “t” at the end of the word would make it sound just like the feminine form, but not pronouncing that letter would likely cause listeners to assume that you are talking about a male student. For now, it is generally recommended to find an epicene word to use if French speakers run into this problem, but some linguists like Alpheratz are attempting to find other pronounceable solutions like creating new gender-neutral endings to a word such as “x” for singular and “z” for plural (Alpheratz). While some parts of the French *écriture inclusive* like the *point milieu* are still under development, it is becoming a clear way for non-binary people to find the words to express themselves in the language.

Although there has been a recent push to make the French language more gender-inclusive, people in power have publicly disapproved of these attempts to make changes to the language, which ultimately prevents French gender-inclusive language from being taught to future generations. For example, while “the use of *iel* and *iels* is believed to have been used for several years in the queer community,” the inclusive pronoun *iel* has not been added to a major French dictionary until a “mainstream French dictionary” called *Le Petit Robert* officially added the term as an entry (Raza-Sheikh). This official validation of the pronoun by a major dictionary was a cause of celebration for the non-binary community and other advocates for the word. However, this action for change by *Le Petit Robert* caused a lot of backlash from other French people, particularly French politicians and the older generation. According to Amy Cheng, who writes for the *Washington Post*, the French minister of education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, argued on Twitter that “inclusive writing is not the future of the French language,” discouraging children from using “Le Robert’s entry as a valid reference.” In addition, the French academy, or *l’Académie Française*, an elite organization in France that governs the usage of the language, has rejected the use of gender-inclusive language in general by releasing a statement in 2017 that inclusive language would cause “*une langue désunie*,” a disunified language, that “[*créerait*] *une confusion qui confine à illisibilité*,” meaning that it would create a confusion that borders on becoming illegible. Putting together what the French minister of education and the Académie has publicly stated, their statements create a message that teachers should not bother teaching inclusive language to their students, since it will only taint the beauty of the language and cause children to become confused. These French politicians emphasize that maintaining the heritage of the French language is more important than allowing people who do not identify with the gender binary to express themselves and preventing them from being erased in everyday conversation; it is putting a system over the needs of the people. Thus, despite the recent attempts of supporters of gender-inclusive language to make the related changes to French used by more people, the damaging message of the Académie and

politicians prevents people from discovering how to improve the French language by encouraging educators to continue to teach outdated grammar rules that exclude an entire community.

Unfortunately, France is more likely to resist changes to the grammar structure of French than its other francophone counterparts due to the increased want of France to maintain the 'beauty' and heritage of the language. In the country of France especially, any mere suggestion of having a new approach to using the language historically causes many French speakers to feel repulsion. For example, according to an Atlantic article written by Annabelle Timset, when French men left their jobs to fight during World War I, women took their positions, which caused the names of the professions to develop feminine forms instead of the traditional "masculine versions." The feminization of professions in French, however, was highly controversial, and after the problem was pushed aside after World War I ended, "efforts at the governmental level to study the possible feminization of French began in 1984 and continued throughout the end of the 20th century, but all proposals were rejected by the institutions that controlled the codification of the language" (Timset). Choosing to value the existing masculine versions of the professions over creating new forms for women is another example of the French elite valuing tradition over innovation in the language, even at the expense of excluding people. Interestingly enough, this pushback against changes in the language mainly seems to be a problem with France as a country, since "Canada started tackling the question of feminizing professions as early as 1979, and Switzerland and Belgium followed suit in 1991 and 1994 respectively" (Timset). And returning to inclusive language for the non-binary community, while "France's prime minister, Edouard Philippe, banned the use of gender-neutral French in all official government documents," Canada "encourages its lawmakers to use gender-neutral language when drafting English versions of their bills" (Cheng). While Canada has not taken the extra step to implement gender-neutral language in French yet, based on the support of the country for gender-neutral English, Canada seems to be more open to the idea than France, and the

same can certainly be said with other francophone countries. One possible explanation of this is that the French Academy, or the Académie, is housed in France, where the elite group can exert more influence due to geographical proximity. Additionally, France may be a more conservative country overall than its francophone counterparts, preferring to preserve the ‘beauty’ and heritage of the language. Jean Aitchison, a linguist, explains that in general, “large numbers of intelligent people condemn and resent language change, regarding alterations as due to unnecessary sloppiness, laziness, or ignorance.” Instead of viewing changes in language as progress, many people in France consider them as a sign that the language is devolving. On the other hand, people in francophone countries that are not under as much influence of the Académie may be more liberal-minded and therefore be more likely to view language change in a more positive light. Thus, it is generally common for people to resist change in the language they have been speaking their entire lives, but people in France are more likely to attempt to keep everything the same. This is a troubling phenomenon that needs to be addressed and fixed, since resisting change at the expense of preventing the non-binary community from being able to express themselves in the language is damaging in the long run.

Although many francophones, particularly people who live in France, are aware of the debate surrounding *écriture inclusive*, few are actually knowledgeable about this controversy—there seems to be a lot of confusion about what *l’écriture inclusive* means and who this concept helps. I was curious about the reactions of everyday French people to making their language more inclusive, so I went on Twitter and looked at recent tweets relating to *écriture inclusive*. Many of the tweets seemed to be against the idea of it, especially when it comes to teaching these new grammar concepts to the younger generations. One tweet I saw from someone who seems to be a French political activist sums up the opposing side well: “*Je suis pour le fait d’interdire à toutes écoles, tous services administratifs, et tout entreprise publique l’utilisation de l’écriture inclusive. Pratique Wokiste qui vise à déconstruire la langue française si riche et belle dans sa difficulté 🇫🇷*” (Sintiv). To translate, he is in support of banning all schools, administrative

services, and public businesses from using inclusive language, adding that *le wokisme* is trying to deconstruct the so-called rich and beautiful French language. *Le wokisme* is a term that the French use that originates from the American slang word “woke,” which according to the *Merriam-Webster* dictionary, means “aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice).” Reading the dictionary definition makes the word sound like it should have a positive connotation. However, after reading French tweets like the one that was written by the political activist, it seems to be that the term *le wokisme* (as well as wokeism in the United States) is thought to involve ties with the politically radical left, which often causes people to see the term negatively and then therefore automatically give *l’écriture inclusive* a negative connotation as well. On the other hand though, a study done in 2017 by Harris Interactive shows that 75% of the French population surveyed were in favor of using inclusive language (Abouardham). Although that statistic may sound great, since the majority actually seem to be in agreement with this concept, only 12% of the 42% of people who had heard of the term *l’écriture inclusive* before the survey were able to clearly articulate what this term means (Abouardham). Although civilian francophones seem to be in agreement with using *l’écriture inclusive*, their perceptions of it are limited by their lack of education on what it means to use it. To make matters even more confusing, even the people who have a good understanding of what it means to use *l’écriture inclusive* may have different ideas on how to use it. For example, the author of the article that explains this study done on *l’écriture inclusive* defines the term as “*la volonté d’utiliser le genre féminin autant que le masculin à l’écrit . . . et de ne plus suivre la règle du ‘masculin l’emporte’*,” meaning that it means using the feminine form of words as much as the masculine and not following the traditional French rule that the masculine form always rules over the feminine (Abouardham). That is definitely a part of *l’écriture inclusive* and a concept that feminists strongly support, and rightfully so— according to traditional French grammar involving pronouns, a room full of women would be *elles*; however, if one man enters that room, even if there are a hundred women present, the pronoun would turn

to *ils*, the masculine plural form. Obviously, it is essential to ensure that one man is not shown to be more important than the hundred women in the room. However, the problem with this feminist approach to *l'écriture inclusive* is that it completely ignores the gender-neutral part of this grammar concept. In the same article that discusses the study done by Harris Interactive, the author only explains how inclusive language would benefit women— she does not mention the effect of *l'écriture inclusive* on people who do not identify with any gender. Although those who exclusively focus on women having greater representation in the language have good intentions for promoting feminism, it is important to note that the genderqueer and non-binary communities should not be left out of the conversation when defining what using inclusive language means, since those communities are being affected by the outdated grammar structure even more than women. Hence, because of bias based on connecting similar words with the political radical left and confusion on who the main focus of inclusive language should be, many French speakers do not have a clear understanding of how to define *l'écriture inclusive*.

The clearest solution to reforming the grammar system to include the genderqueer and non-binary communities would be to include non-binary grammar early on in French education. According to GLSEN, an organization that supports LGBTQ-inclusive education, “1 in 8 students did not conform to ‘traditional’ gender roles, and . . . these children faced more hostile learning environments than their peers. Gender nonconforming elementary students were more likely to have mean rumors or lies spread about them, and to say that they had missed school in the past month because they felt unsafe.” These are statistics referring to American children, but if this organization were to analyze children in the francophone world, these statistics about experiencing an unsafe learning environment would likely be similar or even worse. Many French children may not understand that some people do not identify with being female or male, since non-binary people are made invisible in traditional French grammar that only teaches the singular pronouns *il* and *elle* (he and she). If French educational systems start teaching

elementary students inclusive language, children will start to become aware that there are others who have different identities than themselves, and they will be less likely to bully non-gender-conforming students, which will ultimately lead to a safer learning environment. Additionally, an honors student from Augustana College named Rebecca Lynn Garbe did a research project on a beginners' French course that included *l'écriture inclusive* in its curriculum. Although Garbe was initially afraid that the French Academy was correct that *l'écriture inclusive* is too difficult for French learners to understand, she discovered that throughout the course, "the students understood why and how the challenges of using *écriture inclusive* occurred because they were able to engage in open and honest conversations about these issues with an expert" (Garbe 34). The students in the course were able to make mistakes and learn in an environment where it was safe to "share their identities, identities that are often marginalized in the classroom" (Garbe 34). Inclusive language, contrary to the French Academy's opinion, was in fact not difficult to understand for beginners; in fact, it was actually a topic for interesting discussion on both the successes and limitations of the innovations in the language. By being able to openly talk about how to make the French language more inclusive to people of all identities, students are able to increase their understanding of why the traditional grammar system does not work and increase their empathy for the people who are left out of that system. Although the French class in Garbe's research project consisted of college-aged students, there is no reason why the same curriculum cannot be adapted to fit elementary students who are learning French, whether it is their native language or an additional language, since the course was targeted towards people who do not have prior experience of French. The sooner students incorporate inclusive language into their vocabulary, the more likely the concepts will become the new traditional grammar, allowing the French language to evolve in a more beneficial direction instead of being stuck in one place.

In conclusion, inclusive language is not being used by French speakers as much as it should because francophone citizens, particularly those who live in France, do not have a solid

education on how to define and use *l'écriture inclusive*. A possible solution to this issue would be to teach inclusive language early on in French education so that these recent grammar concepts would be more likely to be incorporated by native French speakers in everyday life. Had I been taught *l'écriture inclusive* all the way from my first year of learning French, I would have found concepts like non-binary pronouns and the *point-milieu* to feel more natural in my writing and speaking. It is the adults' job to help the generations before us to be accepting of people with different identities, and one of the first steps to doing that is ensuring that the language we speak includes everyone in the conversation. If we start to value people over tradition and allow our grammar rules to adjust according to everyone's needs, then our languages will become beautiful on their own.

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