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« Iel Dit Quoi ? » : A Study of the Origins and Evolution of Francophone Gender-Neutral Pronouns and Inclusive Language and a Discussion of French versus Canadian Acceptance

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A Study of the Origins and Evolution of Francophone Gender-Neutral Pronouns and Inclusive Language and a Discussion of French versus Canadian Acceptance

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Abstract

Our interpretation of human gender identity has never been constant. And with it, language has always shifted in order to best represent the many different gender identities and expressions that people associate with themselves. This research examines the current gender-inclusive and gender-neutral French language that exists in both France and Canada. I use three factors: occupational nouns, *l'écriture inclusive,* and neopronouns, especially *iel,* the most common. In this thesis, I evaluate what exists, what has yet to be accepted, and the many different public reactions. I analyzed statements from official language offices, current event articles, and opinions pieces, as well as primary sources and academic journal articles. I also conducted interviews with gender non-conforming Francophone individuals, in order to fill in any gaps in the currently available literature. I chose to study France and Canada, due to their similarities and presence of official language offices. This brief overview is a succinct look into a developing topic, and I hope to continue to research it as development continues.

Acknowledgements

Firstly, I would like to thank my two interviewees, without whom, this research would be incomplete. Your willingness to share means the world to me, and I so enjoyed learning about your experiences. To Dr. Daniel O'Sullivan, my advisor and mentor throughout this work, it has been a pleasure to work with you and learn from you.

À Mimi
Merci d'avoir assuré que j'ai appris le français. J'aimais prendre ma bicyclette chez vous pour nos petites conversations. Sans notre langue, je ne trouverais jamais le chemin de ma vie.
Vous me manquez toujours. Je vous aime beaucoup. Bisous bisous.
Ta petite-fille,
Alyssa

Note to Readers

In an effort to make this thesis accessible for non-French speakers, all quotes originally in French have been translated into English. All translations are my own, unless specified otherwise in the footnotes. All titles of texts originally in French are accompanied by an English translation of said title when first introduced, and then referred to by their official original French title for the remainder of the thesis, so that they may be easily located in my bibliography. I have also elected to keep certain terms and phrases in the original French that either do not exist or do not carry the same meaning in English. These phrases are accompanied by context and explanations so that they may be understood by all readers.

Introduction

Human gender identity has always been fluid, and is viewed differently among the many cultures of the world. It is constantly evolving as we deepen our understanding of who we are. However, language, also ever-changing, has not always reflected these feelings and identities. We adapt language around the human experience. In Romance languages, there are three options when it comes to gender: masculine, feminine, and neuter. When we look at this third option, we find it is an illusion in which the masculine form is used to represent all "neutrally," a concept known as *masculin générique*. In standard French, the official rule is "*Le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin*" [Masculine imposes or takes place over feminine]. If there are 1000 women in a room, but only one man, the group is referred to using the masculine plural pronoun *ils,* as well as masculine agreement.

While the Francophone world is rather unified culturally, the language varies greatly across the globe. Many countries with French as their official language have a national office to set their rules of the language. In France, this is *L'Académie Française* [The French Academy], founded in 1643. They have been vehemently opposed to inclusive changes to the French language for some time now. In 1961, Canada founded *L'Office Québécois de la Langue Française* [The Québec Office of the French Language]. Very quickly, they began sharing resources on how to make Canadian French more gender-inclusive. However, neither country has officially accepted a fully gender-neutral way of speaking. While some language, such as gender-neutral pronouns, exists, it has stayed mostly within the gender non-conforming community. This research seeks to expand the public's knowledge of the gender-neutral language movement happening in many Francophone communities and determine what will likely become commonplace in the future. I will examine the relationship of gender and

occupational nouns in French, the French style of inclusive writing (*l'écriture inclusive*), and already-existing gender-neutral pronouns in my evaluation.

Research Questions

How can we trace the evolution of this language, and will this language be adopted by the general public? How do we define acceptance of new language? How does acceptance differ between France and Canada, both among the general public and between their official language offices?

Methodology

I will use a combination of primary and secondary sources, academic journal articles, news articles and opinion pieces, social media sources, and informal interviews with gender non-conforming Francophone individuals to compile information describing the origins, usage, and current public acceptance of gender-neutral French language in France and Canada (Québec). I have chosen these two countries as they both have official language offices that have very clearly expressed opinions on the topic, and, when focusing on Québec rather than all of Canada, French is the primary language spoken amongst the general public. Academic sources are the best resource for finding what has been approved, recognized, accepted, or rejected by scholars, who have control over formal integration of new language. For example, *L'Académie Française* has published multiple articles critiquing the use of emerging gender-neutral language, calling it an attack on the French language, a result of politics infiltrating our lives, and a byproduct of American "*wokeisme*."

I will use different newspaper articles from each country studied to observe and compare the general public's reaction to this linguistic development. Many opinion pieces have been published on this subject, as well as current event articles following important milestones, such

as the addition of the neopronoun *iel* to the popular French dictionary, *Le Robert*. Social media and informal interviews are the best way to contact the primary source: the people who use this language every day to describe themselves and/or those close to them. Many people include their pronouns in their social media "bios," and the language in question is used very casually online. Because not everyone includes their pronouns in their bios, this data is self-selected, choosing only those who included some aspect of inclusive or neutral French in their profiles. However, just because a person does not have them in their bio, does not mean they do not identify with any pronouns. Also, it is important to recognize that pronouns do not equal gender identity. They are simply one method of gender expression. Gender identity and pronouns are two separate ideas, that people can combine in any way that they feel fits and makes them feel comfortable. Rather than discussing the words and their perception in an academic sense, social media users constantly use them in mundane posts, giving a first-hand look at how these words function in the eyes of those who pioneered inclusive French. I will conduct informal interviews with social media users via direct messaging to supplement my knowledge of how gender-neutral pronouns and *l'écriture inclusive* function.

Summary of Interview Process and Data

Because the language discussed in this research is new and constantly evolving, interviews were conducted in order to supplement existing information and fill gaps in areas that research has yet to cover. Participants were found on Twitter. I contacted an initial group of twenty-five gender non-conforming, Francophone individuals asking if they would like to be interviewed for my research on gender-neutral language in France and Canada. I received only two affirmative responses, one Canadian and one French. They both had very different

experiences with the topic, and were able to provide a holistic view of how differently the language can be used. My findings are as follows.

My first interviewee was a non-binary Québécois, now living in Ottawa, who uses they/them pronouns in English and *iel* in French. They are in their mid-fifties, and have identified with this language for quite some time. We discussed how they use this language in their daily lives, including in their work as a journalist. They also were able to direct me to incredible resources for the work, such as the Canadian federal government's guide for inclusive writing. They believe that, in terms of inclusive language, the Canadian government is much more progressive than *L'Office Québécois de la Langue Française*.

My second interviewee describes her identity as "complicated." Her easy answer to my question was that she is non-binary. Her more complex answer was that she is a trans man who is feminine-presenting. She uses the pronoun *elle* [she] and uses any identifying nouns in the feminine form, but prefers masculine agreement for descriptive words such as adjectives or when forming agreement with past participles. She is an excellent example of how pronouns do not always equal gender identity, but still help someone express themselves. Her identity is something she has pondered for quite some time, as she, along with other gender non-conforming individuals, takes her identity very seriously. Because she has many friends who use inclusive language, she was also able to provide insight into a solution to the pronunciation issues to be discussed in Chapter 2.

Although it would have been more informative to have more participants, the findings from these two interviews proved to be extremely helpful. The interviewees were able to provide a detailed explanation of their experiences while also pointing me towards many great sources. Input from members of this community is so important in this research, because they are the ones

who are creating so much of this language, and they have the final say on how it is used to describe them, no matter what the official, slow-to-change rules say.

Chapter I: The Intersection of Grammatical and Social Gender in Occupational Nouns

Introduction

We often refer to people by their job titles. He is a secretary. She is a doctor. They are a lawyer. When we say these phrases in French, each job title has a grammatical gender that does not always match with the social gender of the subject, the person who has that job. The male secretary from the example would be ***la*** (feminine) *secrétaire,* despite him identifying as a man, and so on. With the emergence of more gender-neutral language in the Francophone world, some argue that we should be able to reflect the social gender of the person in the grammatical gender of the word. On the other side of the argument, some job titles put too much emphasis on gender distinction. Certain French job titles have a masculine and a feminine version, such as writer (*un écrivain* versus *une écrivaine*), but especially in the non-binary community, people would prefer a gender-neutral version so that they can express their own gender identity. There is not one, fix-all solution, but having a masculine and feminine version of each job title, which can be made gender-neutral, is an important step in the right direction.

History

L'Académie Française published the first official dictionary of the French language in 1694, and presented it to King Louis XIV. This dictionary included a masculine and feminine version of every job title that existed at the time (Pilon). However, in 1718, they published a second version of their dictionary. Here, they began to change their rules, starting to assign only one grammatical gender to certain job titles. I began to question what motivated this change. Was it sparked by a political movement? Élianne Viennot explores this change, and other gender-influenced changes, in her book, *Non, le masculin ne l'emporte pas sur le feminin !* (9-12).

L'Académie Française was founded in 1635, by Cardinal Richelieu, who was the Chief Minister of France at the time. As Richelieu was an important figure in the Catholic Church, Viennot believes these changes were influenced by the hierarchy that has been part of the Catholic Church since its inception. Women are not permitted to hold ordained positions of power, such as bishop, priest, or deacon. The Catholic implication that women could not hold such positions likely led to the elimination of certain feminine job titles by the second edition of *L'Académie Française*'s dictionary. This is Viennot's best theory to explain this change between the first and second dictionaries. Viennot uses the rest of the book to continue to examine other changes to the French language influenced by gender politics and to promote the move away from the *masculin génerique* (23-24).

What Do the Current Grammar Rules Say?

Today, we still have a mix of job titles with one grammatical gender, and job titles with a masculine and feminine version. While many have proposed possible changes, official rules of standard French are slow to adapt. Many people simply change the gender of the title they use, despite it not being grammatically correct in the official rules. For example, some people might refer to a female professor as *une professeure.* According to *Le Bon Usage*, a comprehensive guide to French grammar, by Maurice Grevisse, this refers to the wife of a male professor (678). Historically, when women's role in society was directly tied to her husband's, she took on his title, but in the feminine form. This grammatical concept is still common today, especially in the military. However, the beauty of language is that it is able to evolve outside of the official set of rules, among the general public, to adapt to societal changes.

Changing the gender of some job titles can completely change their meaning. Secretary in the feminine refers to a person of any gender tasked with organization and record keeping.

Secretary in the masculine refers to a person of any gender in charge of a governmental department. *Le médecin* is French for medical doctor. This word is always masculine, no matter the social gender of the doctor. The word *la médecine* does exist, but it means the study of medicine. People against the feminization of occupational nouns argue that using this form to refer to woman-identifying doctors would be too confusing.

Looking at the current lexicon, it is easy to identify gender-influenced trends in the grammatical gender of occupational nouns. Above, we have already identified two grammatically masculine jobs that are generally highly regarded by society and one grammatically feminine job that is seen as less important. But, there are plenty of other examples. Engineer is always *un* (masculine) *ingenieur.* Then there are the jobs that are always feminine. We have *la maîtresse* [the elementary school teacher]*, and la nourrice* [the nanny/the child-minder]. It is examples like these that are particularly controversial among those in support of the gender inclusivity movement. They believe this implies that a woman is less than man, that only man can have high ranking jobs and only women can have menial, unappreciated jobs. The current language and grammar do not reflect the views of society anymore.

Encouragement from the French Government

In 2012, the *Ministre du Travail, de l'Emploi, et de la Santé,* passed a law requiring job listings to clearly express that the position they were looking to fill was open to applicants of all genders. This can be done in a multitude of ways, as found by Caroline Lipovsky, a researcher and lecturer at the University of Sydney's School of Language and Culture. If the lister wanted to change as little as possible, but still abide by the law, they would add *H/F* after the job title, indicating it was open to ***H****ommes* [men] and ***F****emmes* [women]. They could also indicate that they were looking for an employee in their field, writing employee as *employé(e)* to include both

the masculine and feminine versions. However, this type of listing could then go on to use gendered occupational nouns and descriptive words, while still abiding by the law. Therefore, Lipovsky defines these as "gender-specific" advertisements (371). According to Lipovsky's definition, "mixed" advertisements can have a masculine occupational noun followed by an inclusive, (or mixed masculine and inclusive), description. They can also have an inclusive occupational noun in the title (an epicene word, or the masculine and feminine versions) with the rest of the description in the masculine. In general, the mixed category refers to listings still using masculine as the default sometimes, but incorporating more inclusivity than the first category (Lipovsky 373-374). Lastly, there are "gender-inclusive" advertisements. Listings here never default to the masculine, but only use gender-inclusive or neutral titles and inclusive or neutral descriptions. One way they do this is by focusing on the actions. They list their requirements in sentence fragments, beginning with the infinitive of the verb. This avoids having gendered subjects or agreements (Lipovsky 375-376).

While expanding inclusivity and spreading awareness of inclusive language are both excellent side effects of this law, that is not its express purpose. Studies show that people within the gender binary were less likely to apply to opposite gender jobs, thinking they were barred from these jobs simply because of the grammatical gender of the title (Lipovsky 362). Having a heavily gendered language makes problems for everyone, not just the people to whom the language more obviously applies, like the non-binary community. People have been missing out on jobs they are highly qualified for because of a political invasion into linguistics. We have evolved to put an extreme (and somewhat controversial) emphasis on social gender, so why is it that we cannot reflect this in our grammar?

A common argument against the advancement of gender-neutral language is that social gender and grammatical gender are not intertwined (L'Académie Française). However, this research cited by Lipovsky proves that is not true in the eyes of much of the general public. If women are hesitating to apply to become, for example, *un directeur* [a director of a program] because the job listing is masculine, then they are implying that they do not socially identify with this word, or that the lister does not qualify that position as something a woman can do (Lipovsky 374). These implicit social biases are not necessarily the truth, but something many people subconsciously understand. Lipovsky discusses in detail how these indirect messages in job listings can affect who applies for a job that is not described in an inclusive or neutral way. People can continue to argue that grammatical and social gender are different when talking about inclusive language, but that will not change the feelings of all the people who know it to be true every day.

Proposed Changes for Inclusivity

Social gender is being talked about more and more in the modern era, with the popularization of the feminist and transgender rights movements. But still, language is taking its time catching up. There is progress to be made in terms of making the language even more inclusive, and also accepting it at an official level. What we have at our disposal is not the end of the evolution of gender-neutral French. That is what Simone Pilon, former chair of the Liberal Arts department at Berklee College of Music, and current Dean of Academic Affairs at their Valencia, Spain campus, explains in her article, "Toward a More Gender-Inclusive and Gender-Neutral French Language" (1). Pilon explores newly created occupational nouns, *l'accord de proximité*, the increased attention towards epicene words, the elimination of articles, and the use of doublets and *l'ecriture inclusive* to combat the *masculin générique*.

One debate surrounding gender in the French language is which way do we go to make the language more inclusive. Is the answer complete gender neutrality? Or should we recognize gender further, having terms to recognize all genders? Female authors in Quebec have pushed to be identified according to their gender. They use the term *un**e** auteur**e*** which is not always recognized by standard French. For example, *Le Robert* does acknowledge it, but refers to it as "common in Canada." *Un auteur* does not technically have a feminine form, so they created one. However, in more recent years, some have argued they should be referred to as *un**e** aut**rice***, so that they could be recognized as women orally as well. This formation follows the pattern of other words ending in -teur that do have a feminine version, such as *un.e réalisateur.trice* and *un.e directeur.trice.* There is no one right answer, but any counterbalance to the masculine dominance is progress.

Another technique Pilon discusses is a concept known as *l'accord de proximité,* or proximity agreement. This concept forms agreement with the word in the list that is closest to the adjective describing the list instead of defaulting to the masculine when it is a mixed gender list (Pilon 2). For example, "*Mon frère et ma sœur sont gentil**e**s,*" "[My brother and my sister are nice (feminine plural)"]. *L'accord de proximité* actually originates from Old French, and was changed in the 17th century along with many other rules of French that impose the *masculin générique*. This rule is found in *Le Grevisse* but is noted that it is most commonly found in older French, and is not the default today (Grevisse, 607). Despite not being the standard for adjectives, this idea is not foreign to the language. We apply something similar when conjugating verbs for a subject consisting of a list with the conjunction "or." We use the conjugation of the verb of the word in the list that is closest to the verb. Some might find this new form of

agreement "jarring," so some put the masculine word at the end of the list in order to make it both grammatically correct and following *l'accord de proximité* (Pilon 3).

She also suggests paying more attention to word choice to try and favor epicene words. These words have forms that are the same in both the masculine and feminine, but another way to incorporate this concept is by using collective terms to avoid identifying the gender of the person or people to which they are referring. If one was talking about a group of journalists, they could easily refer to them as *les journalistes*, a French epicene word. However, gender still comes into play when using an adjective to describe the journalists. Pilon first recommends to try and use adjectives that are also epicene. If the journalists were just starting their jobs, try saying *les jeunes journailstes* [the young journalists] instead of *les nouveaux journalistes* [the new journalists], because *jeunes* is epicene but *nouveaux* is not. If there was no epicene adjective available, one would switch to a collective noun, such as a group of journalists (*un groupe* or *une bande de journalistes*) and then form agreement with the collective noun (Pilon 4). Lipovsky discussed many ways of making job listings inclusive, and epicenes are one of them. Montréal instated a similar policy to the French government regarding job listings: using words without an article and epicenes when possible. Instead of saying, "*La Ville cherche un responsable,"* [The city is looking for a manager], as is the grammatically correct way, one would write, "*La ville cherche responsable,"* [The city is looking for (a) manager]. There is already precedent for this in the official rules of the French language. When one says what their job is, they do not use an article. For example, to say, "I am a professor," one would say, "*Je suis professeur.e*."

Lastly, Pilon discusses the rise of doublets. In lieu of using only the masculine form to address a mixed gender group, people could just say both. Many prefer to put the feminine form first, to recognize the movement against *le masculin générique* (Pilon). Something I noticed in

my time in France was that most professors opened their classes by welcoming the class using this technique. "*Bonjour étudiantes et étudiants,*" ["Hello students (feminine) and students (masculine)"]. In the written form, this has been shortened to *doublets abrégés,* in which the writer first writes the masculine form, the feminine ending, and if needed, the plural ending. The different parts can be separated in a multitude of ways, including but not limited to slashes, hyphens, parentheses, capitalization, periods, or, most commonly, interpuncts (·) (Miller). This style has become known as *l'écriture inclusive*, and has been widely applied to the French language in the name of inclusivity. We use this language most often when referring to groups, but it has also been adopted by the non-binary community to describe one person who does not identify with masculine or feminine agreement alone. Rather than repeating the two plurals, we use *l'écriture inclusive* in the singular to describe those who do not identify with either masculine or feminine agreement.

Figure 1: French Minister of Higher Education and Research using doublets to be inclusive. ["… Students (feminine), students (masculine), I am determined to act for you."]

Chapter II: *L'Écriture Inclusive:* How to Incorporate Inclusivity in a Gendered Language

Introduction

In French, every adjective, possessive, and other descriptive word must agree in gender and number with the word to which it is referring. French has two genders, masculine and feminine, and two numbers, singular and plural, so this seems easy enough. Problems arise when the grammatical gender of a word does not match the social gender of the person it is identifying, as discussed with the topic of occupational nouns. However, this becomes an even bigger problem when we make words plural, because even with words that have a masculine and a feminine version, we must abide by the *masculin générique*. The first singular example that comes to mind is the word person, or *une personne* (feminine) in French. Should a man you are calling a person be referred to in the feminine? According to *Le Grevisse*, if the last way you referred to him was *une personne* then the agreement should be feminine. For example, to say, "That person over there, he ordered the salad," one could say, "*La personne la-bas, elle* [she] *a commandé une salade*." While this is grammatically correct, no one says this, because it does not make much sense to refer to someone who identifies as a man as she. They would likely say something else. Maybe, "*L'homme là-bas, il a commandé une salade*." It is very telling that we have a technically grammatically correct structure that is almost never used because of how it contorts social gender in its prioritization of grammatical gender. When looking at agreement in terms of plurality, French always follows the rule of *le masculin générique*, which says *le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin.* This means that a mixed gender group is always masculine in gender, no matter the ratio of masculine to feminine identifying people. This is the problem that *l'écriture inclusive* aims to solve.

History

The exact origins of l'écriture inclusive are fairly unknown. *L'Office Québécois de la Langue Française* has been working on eliminating the masculine dominance of the French language since the 1970's, but they did not immediately create this style with the endings separated by punctuation (Office Québécois de la Langue Française). They focused more on including women and eliminating masculine dominance than being neutral, and therefore incorporating all genders. Some think it may have emerged as early as 25 years ago, mixed in with feminist movements. In the beginning, it stayed within the community, but as the movement of support for gender neutrality became more and more popular, so did *l'écriture inclusive* (Pilon). Now it can be found in many places, including job listings (as discussed in the last chapter) and classrooms, as was my own personal experience when studying at a French university.

What Is It?

L'écriture inclusive is simple to use for those who are open to it. Rather than using only the masculine or feminine form of a word, the writer would start with the masculine form, then add a period or interpunct (./·), and then write the feminine ending. If the word is plural, add another dot and the plural ending. If the word has different masculine and feminine plural endings, just write the masculine plural ending, followed by the dot, and then the feminine plural ending. Other less common formats include capitalizing the feminine ending, using parentheses or brackets, and dividing with slashes or hyphens (Miller).

Figure 2: LGBTQ+ student group using *l'écriture inclusive*.

["This week, we celebrate the B in LGBTQ+! / No, being bi is not a phase / Being bi is not a trend / Being by is not being lost / It is being yourself. It is being human. / Happy Bisexual Visibility Week to all (feminine) and all (masculine)."]

This style of writing is important for two main reasons. Firstly, as discussed in the last chapter, this language helps clarify when one is talking about only men or about the general public. This can be used in the job listings discussed as a way to incorporate inclusivity, but can also be expanded to language in general. For example, if a teacher wanted to address an entire class, they could address them as *étudiant.e.s*. Secondly, this language allows for people who are non-binary to describe themselves more accurately. This tool is particularly useful in the written form, but not as much in the spoken form, because there is not a clear way to pronounce it (Pilon).

Problems

Because of the dots and multiple endings that do not fit together, it is virtually impossible to pronounce a term in this style. Do we say both forms? Do we create some horrendously pronounced portmanteau? Neither of these are viable options. To solve this problem, many have been following the lead of other languages. The letter x has been used to indicate gender neutrality for quite some time, and we can do the same in French (Participant 2). In languages that use the Roman alphabet, the letter x is not very used often, so by appropriating the letter for this task, we eliminate much confusion. X has been used throughout history to represent something void of meaning. It is the most commonly used variable in mathematics, standing in for nothing and everything. Although there is not much published on the usage of x in spoken French, it is clear to see how people who use this language everyday arrived at the conclusion to pronounce these long, choppy endings as an x (/ks/) (Participant 2).

However, not all people who are non-binary are one hundred percent in support of *l'écriture inclusive*. The word "non-binary" applies to anyone who identifies **outside** of the gender binary, so it is very understandable that some of them would not want to be described with a word that uses the two elements of the gender binary to identify themselves (Pilon). Right now, we do not have much else for a concrete solution. We could borrow from the common pronunciation, trying to incorporate an x, although that is often found in plural endings in French. In an example from another Romance language, Spanish, the letter o traditionally indicates a masculine word, and a, a feminine one. Many people have chosen to use the letter e, which is less frequently used as an ending in standard Spanish, to be the gender-neutral ending, and therefore removing the word from the gender binary. Thankfully, there are many epicene

words in French, so for the time being, we just have to be creative with word choice when describing someone who does not want to be identified with the gender binary system.

Reactions to the Language: France versus Canada Part 1

People on all ends of the spectrum seem to have opinions about *l'écriture inclusive.* One can find a multitude of opinions and news articles relating to the subject. Many people in power comment on it, whether or not they have expertise. There are thousands of tweets containing the words "*l'écriture inclusive*" of all points of view. Everyone from gender non-conforming individuals, to First Lady of France Brigitte Macron; from linguists, to average citizens; has something to say about *l'écriture inclusive*. So, what exactly do people think?

Official Language Offices

Both France's and Canada's official language offices, as well as the Canadian federal government, have commented on the existence and usage of *l'écriture inclusive*. In general, Canada tends to be much more accepting of the language. France's conservative language office is rather opposed to this "invasion of Anglicisms."

L'Académie Française first commented on *l'écriture inclusive* in 2017, when the traditionalist organization wrote a declaration on the topic. In the title, they referred to it as "*l'écriture dite* '*inclusive*'," ["writing called 'inclusive'"] instead of *l'écriture inclusive*, the style's official title, to emphasize their point of view that it is unnecessary. They also are sure to note that the declaration was accepted unanimously. They warn the French to "*mise en garde*," [put their guard up] against *l'écriture inclusive*, as it makes French ununified, over complicated, and illegible. They note that further advancement into this language would put the French language in "*peril mortel*," [mortal peril] because it will become too difficult to learn. Learning a new language can already be extremely difficult, so they believe that adding the alternate,

inclusive forms would discourage people from choosing to learn French as a second language (Carrère). This stance aligns with their historical views against Anglo-influence on the French language. Every month, *L'Académie Française* publishes a newsletter titled *Dire, Ne Pas Dire* [To Say, Not To Say]. This is broken into different categories, one of which is Neologisms and Anglicisms. They specify the English influence because they are so against it. In these publications, they explain why an Anglicism is considered incorrect in the French language, and provide an approved, French alternative (L'Académie Française). The French government seems to be in agreement with this anti-Anglicism stance. In 1994, they passed the Toubon Law, requiring the use of the French language in any government publications and non-private advertisements. Many companies faced hefty fines for using English in commercials on television. Most notably, the French subsidiary of General Electric Healthcare was fined 580,000€ for violating the law, plus 20,000€ per day they did not supply an appropriate translation (Desprès).

Aside from a few small mentions, the next instance of *l'écriture inclusive* comes in 2021, when *L'Académie* announced an open letter on inclusive writing. This letter brings back many of the same sentiments as the last declaration, such as how it is difficult to learn, this time adding how it may be confusing for those with cognitive disabilities, but also introduces some new ideas, even calling it counterproductive to the feminist movement, because it emphasizes a difference between men and women, instead of referring to them equally. They also say that it goes against the natural evolution of language by demanding a complete overhaul be made this instant (which is not what people in support of this movement actually want) (Participants 1 and 2). The letter then brings up the fact that social and grammatical gender have no connection, citing that a ladder is grammatically feminine, but a step ladder is grammatically masculine

(L'Académie Française. "Déclaration de…"). However, there are many instances in which this is untrue, specifically when talking about people, as seen in Chapter 1. Plenty of French words have gender markers that change depending on the identity of the object, such as many of the occupational nouns discussed in the last chapter. Other examples include *fils/fille* [son/daughter] and *étudiant.e* [student], which have oral and written gender markers, and *ami.e* [friend], which only has a written gender marker. These are not instances of only changing the grammatical gender; rather, these words use grammatical gender to indicate social gender. It is clear there is at least some overlap between the two. Therefore, why should this concept not be expanded further so that people can always have their social gender match words that describe them?

Canada appears to be quite the opposite. Both *L'Office Québécois de la Langue Française* and the Canadian federal government are officially in support of making the language more inclusive. Québec even has a tool called the *Vitrine Linguistique* [Linguistic Showcase]. It is a search engine in which anyone can go online and search a question they have about the language. Canada's federal government, in an effort to encourage the language throughout the entire country, released a guide to inclusive writing in both English and French. Obviously, Canada is putting in the effort to welcome all Canadians through language. Perhaps this progressive view on inclusivity comes from the country's history as a nation of immigrants, welcoming those who were not accepted in other places.

The *Vitrine Linguistique* offers a multitude of results when you search "*écriture inclusive.*" Different articles offer different ways to use the language, such as when you are referring to a mixed-gender group, or when you are indicating that someone is non-binary. They also have guides on the feminization of the language, so that we do not always default to the masculine. For example, if you visit the page for *les doublets abrégés*, you can find a general

definition, a list of the different types, examples, and then a comprehensive guide to each type. They have also compiled all of their resources on gender-neutral language onto one page, with links to specifics on all the different tools, including epicene words, neutral formation, non-binary writing, and *l'écriture inclusive* (Office Québécois de la Langue Française).

The federal government's guide is much more comprehensive. Another benefit is that all the information is easily accessible on the official government website, all in the same place, as opposed to having to conduct a specific search, like the *Vitrine*. They even have guides for alternating between feminine and masculine forms and how to personalize the language to best fit one's needs and identity. This tool only became available directly from the Canadian government in October 2022, but Canada is truly making an effort to publicize and popularize this language.

> "*Les personnes de la diversité sexuelle et de genre ont mis et continuent de mettre de l'avant différents procédés de rédaction en français permettant de produire des textes qui correspondent à leur réalité. Les articles suivants présentent certains de ces procédés, comme les néologismes (mots nouveaux) de genre neutre, et traitent de la traduction du pronom anglais "they" employé au singulier*" ("Écriture Inclusive – Lignes Directrices et Ressources").
>
> ["Members of gender-diverse communities have put forward various techniques for writing English texts that correspond to their realities. The articles below present some of these techniques (including the use of gender-neutral pronouns) and examine issues related to translating gender-inclusive texts from French"] ("Inclusive Writing – Guidelines and Resources")[1]

[1] Translation courtesy of Government of Canada, "Inclusive Writing – Guidelines and Resources."

Canada is actively communicating with the gender non-conforming community in order to make their guide as accurate and inclusive as possible. This is an issue they are putting at the top of their agenda. After having only been published for one month, they began making updates and edits, showing they are open to critique and input from the community, as well as paying attention to how this ever-changing language evolves.

Newspapers and Op-Eds: The General Public's Reaction

Le Monde is one of France's biggest news sources, covering topics on all ends of the political spectrum, so I decided to use them as my French news source. For Canada, I selected *Le Journal de Montréal* and *Radio-Canada* because, like *Le Monde,* they are both large newspapers with a variety of opinions. Montréal is also the largest city in Québec, and therefore, likely to attract a more diversely opinionated audience. Because of their wide reach and relative neutrality, I selected one positive and one negative article on *l'écriture inclusive* that I decided best represented the ideas of the public, when compared to other articles. I chose one positive and one negative article, because as previously stated, the opinions on the subject are rather mixed throughout the country.

The positive article from France is entitled "L'écriture inclusive ou la longue quête d'une langue égalitaire" ["Inclusive Writing or the Long Quest for an Egalitarian Language"] by Clara Cini. In this article, she discusses the numerous political changes and challenges to the French language throughout its history. With each one, she points out their hypocrisy and flawed arguments, all while affirming that this language is correct and necessary for the French people. She brings up *L'Académie Francaise*'s claim that *l'écriture inclusive* puts the language in "mortal peril," and refutes it with facts, citing historian Christine Bard, one of many who have pointed out that many of this "new" feminist language is rather old in fact, such as *l'accord de*

proximité. Cini states, "*Pour cette nouvelle génération, il s'agit d'employer toutes les ressources du français afin de redonner une place à l'expression du genre féminin,*" ["For this new generation, this means using all of French's resources in order to give back a place to the expression of feminine gender"] (Cini). Cini ties this language to the feminist movement, noting that support of this language cannot be separated from feminist beliefs.

For the negative reaction, I chose to showcase the opinions of Jean-Michel Blanquer. As a member of the French government, he **should** be representative of his constituents, or at least some of them. He was appointed to be the Minister of Education by President Emmanuel Macron, an elected official, so we can assume that at least some of the people who put him into power, either directly (the President and the Prime Minister) or indirectly (the voting population) support his beliefs on this topic. He has spoken out publicly against this language many times, whether that be on his Twitter or at outings. This particular article covers his decision to ban the use of the interpunct, and therefore, *l'écriture inclusive*, in French schools. He bases this decision in his agreement with *L'Académie Française* that this style makes the language too hard to learn, particularly for dyslexic students. To sum up his opinion, he states, "*On a un énorme enjeu de consolidation de savoirs fondamentaux, et l'écriture inclusive vient en barrage de cet enjeu*" ["We have an enormous challenge with the consolidation of fundamental learning, and inclusive writing comes as a barrier to this operation"]. He does not see the use in language like this when, according to the official rules, the masculine is already the generic form (*Le Monde,* "Écriture inclusive…").

In the *Radio-Canada* article, journalist Camille Boutin interviewed different Canadians on why they support *l'écriture inclusive* after the publication of the Canadian federal government's bilingual guide to inclusive language, calling this "*un pas plus,"* or, a step in the

right direction. She interviewed a fellow journalist, a professor, and a coordinator for an LGBTQ+ youth group. One interviewee even said, "*Si l'écriture inclusive n'est pas enseignée à l'école élémentaire, ça va poser problème pendant longtemps,*" ["If inclusive writing is not taught in elementary schools, this will pose problems for a long time"]. It is very important for these people from different sectors and backgrounds to come together to support this language. Having a diverse group to promote the language only furthers and hastens its acceptance (Boutin).

Lastly, from *Le Journal de Montréal*, we have Joseph Facal, an opinion writer for the paper. In his op-ed, "Ce qui m'énerve avec l'écriture inclusive," ["That Which Annoys Me with Inclusive Writing"], he lists what he, and others who are generally against the institutionalization of *l'écriture inclusive*, dislike. He notes he is not against certain replacements that have already become standard, like "*droits de la personne*" instead of "*droits de l'homme*" ["rights of the person" instead of "rights of man"], but he believes that things have gone too far. Facal cites this note that Parisians received from the mayor's office:

> "*Vous recevrez la visite d'un.e agent.e recenseur.seuse recruté.e par la mairie de votre arrondissement et muni.e, à cet effet, d'une carte officielle. [...] Lorsque l'agent.e recenseur.euse se présentera à votre domicile, il.elle vous proposera de répondre par voie électronique.*"
>
> ["You will be visited by a census agent recruited by the mayor of your arrondissement and provided, for this purpose, with an official card. [...] When the census agent presents themselves at your home, he/she will propose that you respond electronically."]

He believes that the extensive usage of *l'écriture inclusive* makes this letter illegible, and that there is no future for this "*galimatias"* [rigmarole] in "*vrais métiers* d'écriture" [real writing

jobs] such as journalism, literature, and publishing. He also opines that the idea that languages always evolve, something many supporters of this language say, is a sophism, noting that languages only evolve when the people use it, something he believes will not come to be for *l'écriture inclusive* (Facal).

Chapter III: *Iel Dit Quoi ?*: Neopronouns to Break the Gender Binary

Introduction

As the modern gender-identity movement continues to rise to popularity, more people are exploring gender-neutral language, looking for the best, most comfortable way to identify themselves. People want to be referred to in a way that makes them feel comfortable, respected, and valued. This is where neopronouns, or personal pronouns created through the gender identity movement that often do not align with one category of the gender binary, come into play. For some time, Anglophones have been using "they," the third-person plural pronoun, to identify the third-person singular. In French, it is slightly more complicated. They have two, third-person, plural pronouns: one masculine and one feminine, so they cannot do what English has done. There is also the pronoun "*on*," third-person neuter, although over time, the word was co-opted to be an informal way of saying "we," making it unavailable to become a gender-neutral identification option. And so, over the course of time, different versions of French neopronouns began to pop up, such as *al, el, iel, ielle, ille, ol, olle, ul, ulle, ael, æl, aël, yel, i,* and *im* (*La Vie En Queer*). This list will undoubtedly continue to grow; the ones that already exist came out of thin air with no linguistic precedent. But the question remains, which one will prevail and perhaps even be adopted into the language officially? It is impossible to answer, as there are no discernible patterns in their origins or their usage at the moment.

History

The origins of the pronoun *iel* are fairly clear when a French speaker looks at the word. It is a combination of *il* and *elle*, the two third-person, singular, gendered pronouns. Many people came to this conclusion separately, but simultaneously, as seen in the various spellings of the word, such as *el, ielle,* and *ille.* Other neopronouns evolved to avoid the reinforcement of the

gender binary (Pilon 4). *Yel* is an alternate spelling of *iel*, pronounced the same, but spelled in a way to remove itself from the gender binary origins of the word. Other non-binary neopronouns include *al, ol, olle, ul, ulle, ael, æl, aël, i,* and *im* (*La Vie En Queer*).

Who Is Using This and Where?

People are increasingly using the pronoun *iel* and this language in general. With the rising popularity of the gender identity movement, people become more confident identifying as gender non-conforming and non-binary. This language spreads through the people who identify with it, getting passed along to their friends to widen its reach. When someone realizes they do not identify with *il* or *elle*, they often look towards *iel* and other neopronouns. A person who is non-binary is someone who identifies outside or the gender binary, neither man nor woman. Someone who is non-binary can also be gender non-conforming, but not all gender non-conforming people are non-binary. Gender non-conforming simply means that the person does not wish to fit the traditional gender roles of either their gender assigned at birth or one of the genders typically associated with the gender binary (Participant 2).

Even with an option to have a gender-neutral pronoun, Francophone people still face the problem of making agreement. Because descriptive words must agree in gender, there is no one way to form agreement with a gender-neutral pronoun. Some people use *l'écriture inclusive,* but others choose whether they want masculine or feminine agreement, alternated agreement (using both masculine and feminine), or a preference for epicene words (Participant 2).

French inclusive language is very prominent on social media, particularly Twitter. Twitter is an excellent source for looking for examples of this language because it focuses on written posts as opposed to pictures or videos. Following are some tweets showing examples of how people use this language in a normal setting.

Here, a Canadian person uses their Twitter profile "bio" to display their pronouns. They have them listed in both English and French. Following the French, they noted that they preferred masculine agreement.

Figure 3: A Twitter user includes their pronouns in their bio.

["*iel* + masculine agreement"]

In this Tweet, a user celebrates International Pronouns Day to share that they would like to be referred to as either *ul* or *ol*, two of the non-binary neopronouns. When it comes to agreement, they prioritize epicene descriptors or *l'écriture inclusive* when possible.

Figure 4: A Twitter user tweets about International Pronouns Day.

["Today is #InternationalPronounsDay apparently. / So, a quick reminder that here, I use *ul* and/or *ol* with either epicene words or inclusive agreement (or anything else that is neither feminine nor masculine.)"]

People who prefer to keep a gendered pronoun, but use inclusive agreement, are another common occurrence. This user still identifies with the feminine pronoun *elle* and feminine agreement, but if someone is writing about them in French, they ask that the agreement is written in the neutral form, such as *l'écriture inclusive.*

Figure 5: A Twitter user shares their pronouns in a Tweet.

[I will keep she / feminine agreement (or neutral in writing) and they/she in English (with a preference for they).]

Problems

Much like with *l'écriture inclusive,* many people take issue with the fact that *iel* is so closely related to the gender binary. The word is a combination of *il* and *elle,* the masculine and feminine pronouns, respectively. Many non-binary people want to use a new pronoun to remove themselves from the gender binary, so using *iel* might not be the right fit for them. And while there are other neopronouns in French, they are even less common than *iel.*

This points to the broader problem: the lack of consistency. Many French speakers, especially those who are already hesitant to accept inclusive language, take issue with the fact that there are many different versions. People could be less likely to accept a new pronoun when it comes with multiple spelling variations and alternate options. In order to get official acceptance, we may need to compromise by standardizing this language. The most important

thing, however, is that people who do not identify with this language are listening to those who do, and learning how they can use it to make those around them comfortable.

Proposed Changes for Inclusivity

Because many of these options reinforce the gender binary, as previously discussed, some argue that we should default to a different neopronoun, or at least have more recognition for them (Pilon). This is where the pronoun *yel* becomes very useful. It is pronounced exactly the same as *iel*, the most commonly used neopronoun, but it is spelled in a way that removes it from the gender binary. If this spelling were more popularized, this pronoun could be more widely applied.

Reactions to the Language: France versus Canada Part 2

Addition into *Le Robert*

In 2018, *Le Robert* added the pronoun *iel* into their dictionary, causing quite a stir. Despite *Le Robert* calling the word rare (see Fig. 6), people from the LGBTQ+ community were excited to get some official recognition. However, French language traditionalists were disappointed to see this infiltration, particularly the First Lady.

Figure 6: The dictionary definition of *iel*, according to *Le Robert*.

Brigitte Macron has a very interesting place in this discussion. She is a public figure, but also is a former high school teacher of the French language. She spoke out condemning *l'écriture inclusive* in 2021, after *Le Robert* added the gender-neutral pronoun *iel* to their dictionary. Macron stated "*il y a deux pronoms : il et elle. La langue est si belle. Et deux pronoms, c'est bien*" ["There are two pronouns, he and she. Language is so beautiful, and two pronouns, that's good"]. She was at an event promoting anti-bullying efforts at a middle school in Paris when she made said comment (*Le Monde*, "Brigitte Macron..."). Frankly, this is incredibly disappointing to hear from a teacher. It is so important to be accepting when interacting with students because it greatly increases their mood and quality of life, and also their ability to ask questions and feel safe in the classroom, helping to improve their grades (Wood).

Official Language Offices

L'Académie Française, of course, is not in support of this language. However, unlike with *l'écriture inclusive,* they have no mention of the word, subtly disapproving of it. They are simply ignoring its existence. We can infer that they are against it because of their stance on *l'écriture inclusive*. Perhaps, they believe that even denouncing the word would be interpreted as them acknowledging or validating it, which is something they do not want to do (L'Académie Française).

The Canadian federal government was surprisingly less advanced when it came to the pronoun *iel* than with *l'écriture inclusive.* They have very little mention of *iel*, and they recommend that we default to other options, such as not using pronouns for someone and only using their name, before using *iel* ("Écriture Inclusive – Lignes Directrices et Ressources"). It is somewhat disappointing that an organization that can be so progressive in terms of inclusivity in writing would ignore the wishes of the non-binary community. It creates confusion that they so

readily accept certain forms of inclusivity but not others. This resistance likely comes from it being relatively new, so they are trying to suggest something grammatically correct before a new, unaccepted form. To them, adding a new pronoun is a completely radical proposition compared to *l'écriture inclusive* or changing job titles, which they have dealt with for much longer.

L'Office Québécois de la Langue Française is in support of the pronoun *iel* in the same way they are for *l'écriture inclusive*. Their *Vitrine Linguistique* comes up with two articles about the pronoun *iel* and its usage (Office Québécois de la Langue Française). While on paper, *L'Office* seems more progressive than the Canadian federal government, this does not match the perspective of the Canadian public. One interviewee mentioned that *L'Office* is actually considered more conservative (Participant 1). This is understandable considering that Québec makes it slightly more difficult to find this information.

Conclusion

Inclusive language in French is a fairly new concept with many different definitions of what is inclusive and what is neutral, in terms of gender. Its earliest forms emerged in the 1970's, and have evolved into what we have today, being influenced by different gender movements and advancements in our understanding of gender identity versus gender expression. Because French is derived from Latin, it is heavily gendered, requiring agreement for not only pronouns, but also occupational nouns, adjectives and other descriptive words.

This thesis describes the origins of gender-neutral Francophone language and the evolution it has experienced since its inception. The first goal of this language was to move away from masculine dominance, so people, particularly Canadians, began creating feminine versions of words that had been only masculine for the past 300 years, and rather than using the masculine to refer to a group of people, they would use the masculine and the feminine, sometimes even putting the feminine first in order to make it clear they were supporting women's rights. This eventually transformed into *l'écriture inclusive*, an abridged form of doublets that can be used in the singular or plural to reference a person or group of people in a gender-inclusive way. As the world's ideas of gender continued to evolve, a new gap opened in terms of gender inclusivity: the lack of gender neutrality.

Most gender-inclusive words and styles were combinations of the masculine and feminine, meaning they were not truly neutral. With more people identifying as gender non-conforming every day, they searched for a way to convey this in written French. It is in this search that the word *iel* and many other neopronouns came to be. Of course, some of these pronouns, including the most common, *iel*, still have the same issue of reinforcing the gender binary, but many people are coming up with alternatives.

Like many debates today, opinions around the topic of gender-neutral French are highly polarized, with those that have knowledge on the topic being either highly opposed or extremely in favor of *l'écriture inclusive* and the pronoun *iel*. Those who support the language believe it is a step towards acceptance of the gender non-conforming community, and those opposed believe it is an attack on the French language, and a step too far into political correctness. Mixed opinions like these can be found among the general public, but also within the official language offices and federal governments of both France and Canada. At the moment, it is hard to tell if or when a consensus will be reached, or if the language will ever be officially accepted.

The purpose of this research is to create a concise, comprehensive guide to gender-inclusive and gender-neutral language in French. Very few, if any at all, exist currently. This research has also been shared at six different research conferences as of the date of defense (April 27, 2023), disseminating the knowledge to teachers, linguists, and other academics. An important aspect of sharing this research was that it could be accessible to French teachers, particularly in the United States, so that they could implement this in their classrooms. I am happy to say that this has already been achieved. A student from a local high school saw one of my presentations, and said that she had learned the exact same thing in her French class. When I asked who her teacher was, she revealed it was someone I had met at my very first presentation. I hope that teachers continue to learn this information, whether from my research or someone else's, in order to create more welcoming classrooms across the country.

Being an undergraduate thesis, I was limited in what I could include. Ideally, I would be able to discuss every Francophone country's rules and attitudes. I would specifically examine former French colonies, looking into their ideas on gender before being introduced to a Romance language, how they changed during colonization, and what their attitudes towards this language

are today. If not for the time constraint, I would conduct many more interviews, in order to get a better look into the gender non-conforming community's views on the language. So, while I was only able to study two Western, majority white countries in this research, I hope to continue and expand upon this project in my graduate studies and professional career.

Appendix A

Interview Questionnaire

1. Are you 18 years old or above? *Avez-vous 18 ans ou plus ?*
2. Where are from?/Where do you currently reside? *D'où venez-vous ? / Où habitez-vous maintenant ?*
3. How do you describe your gender identity? / *Comment est-ce que vous décrivez votre identité de genre ?*
4. What pronouns do you use in French? In what contexts? *Quels pronoms utilisez-vous en français ? Dans quels contextes ?*
    a. How do people react to this now? *Comment est-ce que les autres y réagissent ?*
    b. How do you ask people to form agreement? *Comment demandez-vous aux autres de faire l'accord ?*
5. What gender-neutral language do you know about in French? *Quel langage neutre au niveau du genre est-ce que vous connaissez en français ?*
    a. Follow up will be determined based on responses
6. Do you think this language will one day be accepted as the norm in your country? Please explain. *Est-ce que vous pensez que ce langage sera accepté un jour comme la norme dans votre pays ? Expliquez s'il vous plaît.*
    a. If no, where/who is the resistance coming from? *Sinon, d'où/de qui vient la résistance ?*

7. Do you think is anything missing from the current gender-neutral language that is available? *Est-ce que vous pensez que le langage neutre au niveau du genre qui existe aujourd'hui suffit ? Est-ce qu'on manque quelque-chose ?*
    a. If so, what? *Si oui, quoi ?*
    b. More follow up based on response.
8. How do you use, if at all, l'écriture inclusive? *Comment est-ce que vous utilisez l'écriture inclusive ?*
9. How do you incorporate l'écriture inclusive into spoken language? *Comment est-ce que vous incorporez l'écriture inclusive à l'oral ?*
10. More questions may arise based on the conversation.

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