

## Language Ideologies in Inclusive Language Debates in France (2000-2022)

Questions of gender equality in the French language are by no means new, and date from at least the French Revolution and Olympe de Gouges' 1791 publication of *La Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne* in response to *La Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen*, published two years earlier in 1789. However, debates on gender-inclusive language have erupted once again — most recently in November 2021, with the introduction of the gender neutral pronoun *iel* in the dictionary *Le Robert*. This eruption, however, is just one in a series of debates on language and gender that have hit the national headlines in recent years. Indeed, since 2020 no fewer than three bills have been put forward in the National Assembly attempting to sanction the use of gender neutral language in the public sector, in particular the middot, for example, *chaque citoyen·ne* (every citizen). Had these bills become law, any employee of the French state would have been fined 5000€ for using the middot in professional correspondence. A few years earlier in 2017, an online petition<sup>1</sup> was signed by almost 35 000 people in support of teachers who refused to teach the tradition grammatical rule that the masculine takes precedence in sentences with both masculine and feminine nouns, for example: *un chien* MASC SG *et dix femmes* FEM PL *sont arrivés* MASC PL (one dog MASC SG and ten women FEM PL arrived MASC PL) where the past participle *arrivés* is in the masculine because the masculine grammatical gender of the noun *chien* (dog) takes precedence over the feminine grammatical gender of *femmes* (women).

This presentation examines attitudes to gender inclusive language, ranging from feminine job titles, to the introduction of the pronoun *iel* and the use of the middot. A corpus of just under 200 newspaper articles, whose main subject was gender fair language, was built from French national newspapers, dating from 2000 to the present day. The aim of this study was to identify the discourses drawn upon in the gender inclusive language debate, and the underlying language ideologies (Woolard 1998) that these discourses are built upon. The gender inclusive language debate can be viewed as an arena, in which a struggle over words and what they mean is taking place, but at the same time, a struggle over who has the authority to define language usage (Mills 2008). This is, in fact, a perfect example of what Blommaert (1999) calls a “language ideological debate”. Language ideological debates are arenas in which not only are language ideologies are shaped and reshaped, but languages themselves. For instance, the language ideology of LANGUAGE IS A TOOL is currently reshaping the French language (the addition of *iel* has modified the pronominal system).

A corpus linguistics approach was used in order to extract key words, followed by a closer critical discourse analysis (Baker 2014), in particular a critical metaphor analysis (Charteris-Black 2004). The language ideologies identified were, in fact, very often expressed in metaphorical terms (for example, LANGUAGE IS NATIONAL TREASURE, OR LANGUAGE IS A WEAPON). Examples from a similar corpus of articles from the British press will be drawn upon in order to highlight any particularly interesting differences between attitudes expressed. Rather strikingly, very similar discourses and language ideologies were identified in both the French and British corpora, despite the differences in linguistic structure and sociolinguistic histories of the two countries. Nevertheless, some interesting variations were observed, which I argue can be explained by the relative “ideological force” (del-Teso-Craviotto 2006) of certain language ideologies in one country compared to the other, rather than the structure of the language itself.

### References

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.change.org/p/nous-ne-voulons-plus-que-le-masculin-l-emporte-sur-le-feminin>

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