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A war on women? The extent to which French and English are presented and perceived as necessitating feminist language reform on social media.

This study analyses discursive responses towards feminist language reforms (FLR) on Twitter in French and English within a Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) framework. Researching the discriminatory effects of language practices is a primary concern of feminist linguists looking to uncover the complex ways in which language systems represent women and men (Liddicoat 2011: 1). FLR – comprising strategies with the aim of remedying gender bias in language (Pauwels 2003: 552) – has thus become an increasingly prevalent means of addressing gendered language practices, and to raise awareness of the socially-embedded role of language in gendering people, activities, and ideas.

However, while certain reforms have been relatively successful (e.g., Milles 2011), others have been rejected or simply remain absent from everyday usage. Likewise, while institutions and macro-level agencies have previously been instrumental to the implementation of language planning and policy, this top-down dynamic has shifted following the increasing popularity and use of social media as widely practiced communication platforms. All users are now empowered and possess the means to participate in language debates, as well as the dissemination, creation, and consumption of content, shifting the traditional one-to-many interface of mass media to that of a many-to-many dynamic of discursive practice (KhosraviNik 2017: 582). This study thus compares and discusses online responses to explore how users position themselves towards FLR, and what this positioning reveals about how issues of gender (in) equality are perceived across diverse linguo-cultural contexts. Specifically, the aims of this study are:

- i) To explore how Twitter users position themselves in relation to FLR.
- ii) To identify the types of discourses that are circulated in Twitter users' rejection or acceptance of reform, and which (in)directly construct wider, hegemonic discourses of gender inequality
- iii) To discuss the potential effects of the discourses constructed by Twitter users on the ways in which issues of sexism and gender inequality are perceived

This study employed a triangulatory approach to data collection and analysis (following Baker and Levon 2015). Tweets were collected using the *search_tweets* function in *RTweet* (Kearney 2019), a package for statistical analysis tool R(Studio), resulting in a final corpus of 13,000 French and English Tweets. Following Durham (2016), *RTweet* was programmed to collect Tweets published in relation to search terms '*herstory*', '*gender-inclusive language*', '*l'écriture inclusive*' and '*langue inclusive*'. Responses were then imported into NVivo 12, a qualitative analysis software, where linguistic tokens of discourses were thematically coded. This incorporated sentiment analysis and word frequency queries, followed by manual discourse identification using Wodak and Reisigl's (2017) framework. Discourses with the highest frequency of occurrence were then discussed in relation to techniques from critical discourse analysis, including intertextuality, interdiscursivity, positioning, framing, among others, selecting representative examples that allowed for the construction of dominant attitudes, ideologies, and themes to be explored.

Results of both quantitative and qualitative analysis suggest that FLR is predominately rejected among French-speaking Twitter users. Rejection involves the positioning of FLR as synonymous with an ostensibly 'woke' ideological agenda associated with themes of excess, extremism, and propaganda, with this agenda perceived to work in the service of a vocal minority at

the expense of a silent majority. Within online spaces, these themes are also constructed by users who repurpose (digital) practices like cancel culture to characterise FLR as a form of silencing, censorship, and policing. In tandem, users also construct discourses of endangerment to position FLR and its 'woke' agenda as an affront to the vitality of the French language, and thus as an attack on French culture and identity. The liberatory aims of FLR are therefore framed as at the expense of other, more important, social, political, and cultural issues.

Responses to FLR in the English-speaking context present similar discursive complexities, with discussion of reforms polarised by those who champion the use of strategies that empower, unify, and better reflect the diverse experience(s) of women, or who view reform as incapable of adequately accounting for all forms of diverse group oppression (hooks 2015: 163). For example, users are found to draw upon 'herstory' to construct discourses of empowerment, foregrounding a modern, postfeminist hegemonic femininity characterising empowered, independent, and remarkable women (see McRobbie 2004, 2015; Lazar 2006, 2011). While this is overtly celebratory, however, I argue that this has the potential to 'marginalise the unremarkable' insofar as it backgrounds women who do not conform to this image.

Responses to 'gender-inclusive language' are also polarised. At one level, negative responses dominantly include 'biological' women drawing upon sex-essentialist discourses to frame themselves as dehumanised by reform that inadequately represents, if not entirely erases, the 'unique' experiences of women as a sex-class. On the contrary, those in support of gender-inclusive language often retaliate by drawing attention to 'TERFs' (trans-exclusionary radical feminists) via discourses of backlash (Faludi 1991), framing rejection as tyrannical, excessive, and transphobic. These presentations of radical feminists, however, are also found to be problematically conflated by users with feminism more broadly, calling into question the extent to which feminism is perceived to adequately represent the experiences of all marginalised genders.

Overall, FLR is variably presented and perceived among French and English-speaking Twitter users depending on not only its form, but also the wider social-ideological and linguo-cultural context within which it is to be implemented. I observe that FLR can be mobilised in ways that both overtly and covertly undermine its emancipatory aims. This study thus concludes that FLR can be beneficial to the extent that it is a step towards, rather than achieving in itself, the dismantling of oppression(s) faced by marginalised genders. As such, the development, implementation, and evaluation of language reform must be dialogic processes, the success of which is ultimately dependent on identifying and understanding the needs, attitudes, and ideologies of target populations across diverse realities of language use.

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