

Une Langue Pour Tou·te·s - How a Keyboard Character Put the French Language in “Mortal Danger”

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Language shapes society and society shapes language. The people who speak a language determine its evolution: ideas and social attitudes are constantly evolving, and the language one uses naturally reflects this change. At the same time, language can confine speakers through grammatical rules that enforce ideologies on society. I believe that this reciprocal relationship between language and society is demonstrated perfectly in the French language through the controversial linguistic aspiration of *l'écriture inclusive*.

L'écriture inclusive, or inclusive writing, is the use of graphic and syntactic emphasis to ensure equal representation between women and men (Mots-Clés, 2016). Over the past century, feminists have criticised certain grammatical features of the French language as it is believed that they contribute to and reinforce patriarchal norms in society, demonstrating that language can shape society. However, the push for inclusive writing demonstrates that attitudes are changing, which highlights that language is being shaped by society to solve this issue. To understand the controversy surrounding inclusive writing, it is necessary to understand gender syncretism in French and the leading critic of the movement: the *Académie française*.

Gender syncretism is when the masculine takes precedence over the feminine. For example, if we describe a group of females, we would use the feminine third-person plural pronoun *elles*. However, no matter the size of the group of females, if we add one male into the equation, we revert to gender syncretism and use *ils* to define the entire group. Therefore, in French, the masculine is dominant and can be used to cover both genders, otherwise known as the masculine generic. This was fixed into the language officially in 1647, with Claude Fabre de Vaugelas' infamous declaration that *le masculin est le genre le plus noble* (the masculine gender is the most noble). The use of the masculine generic results in the linguistic erasure of the feminine, which is proven to detrimentally impact the visibility of women in society in experiments carried out by Brauer (2018). These studies show that using the masculine

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generic carries an unconscious gender bias. Therefore, it is important to adopt inclusive writing to refute these biases imposed by language.

Various solutions have been proposed to solve this issue. However, the most controversial has been the *point milieu* (·). Instead of using the masculine generic, a word can include both the feminine and the masculine with the *point milieu* used to separate gender markers within the word. For example, in regular writing, if one were to describe a mixed group of friends, it would be tous les amis in the masculine generic, whereas the female version would be toutes les amies. The inclusive writing formulation of this phrase would be tou·te·s les ami·e·s. The use of the *point milieu* overhauls the rule of the masculine gender having more dominance over the feminine as both are equally represented within the sentence.

Despite its meritable cause, the introduction of the *point milieu* has been received negatively, creating a huge controversy in France. As a result, the French minister of education, Jean Michel Blanquer, declared that “inclusive writing is not the future of French” and stated in May 2021 that all forms of inclusive language will be banned in schools. This was preceded by a petition which garnered over 25,000 votes, showing a strong opposition against the adoption of inclusive writing (Conruyt, 2021). However, I believe inclusive writing faces the most criticism from *l'Académie française*, the institution that aims to regulate the grammar and vocabulary of the French language.

Since its inception, the *Académie française* has criticised the inclusive writing movement, which started with the feminisation of job titles during World War Two. At the time this proved to be controversial; if names of jobs were not allowed to be feminised, then what did it suggest about the place of women in the workplace and society? The *Académie française*'s roots are politically motivated rather than linguistically informed (Véron, 1985). Filstroff (2019) shows that the average age of an “academician” is 77 years old, and 4/5 of the current members are male, highlighting a lack of diversity in gender and age. This sample does not reflect the speakers of the French language. Furthermore, he proves that many notable members are not linguists but politicians and historians, which begs the question of how qualified these institutions and their members are in deciding the future of the language. The very role of the Academy is to document and register the evolution of the French language. Its attempts to marginalise inclusive writing stems from political as opposed to linguistic motivations, where inclusive writing in French is now perceived as a war between the radical left and the conservative right.

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The *Académie française* has openly criticised inclusive writing. The institution has expressed concerns over the complicated layout of inclusive writing, which some people find difficult to comprehend. However, research shows that after reading sentences which include the point milieu two or three times, our brains become accustomed to the layout and reading speed increases dramatically (Gygax and Gesto, 2007). Furthermore, the Academy has even accused inclusive writing of putting the French language into *péril mortel* (mortal danger). This heavily dramatised view of inclusive writing has been ridiculed online, most notably by the popular French Youtube channel *Linguisticae*, which has done extensive research on the legitimacy of the Academy. The fundamentals of inclusive writing go against the institution's views, which means that they refuse to include it in their puritanical vision of language. The Academy's refusal to feminise job titles and accept the *point milieu* shows that any form of linguistic evolution, unless it conforms with their political beliefs, is not eligible to be officially added into the language.

Inclusive writing is an interesting controversy which intersects with distinctive arguments ranging from the linguistic, social and political spectrums. The inclusive writing movement has addressed the issues surrounding the role of women in society and has proven that language contributes to this inequality. However, the most important topic to come out of this controversy, I believe, is the scrutiny of the role of the *Académie française*. After its continued reluctance to accept evolution in language, the *Académie française* can be seen as an organisation with outdated views intertwined with their conservative political position. Nevertheless, society is constantly changing, and even if the Academy tries its best to prevent it from happening, language will inevitably change.

In conclusion, inclusive writing is just as much, if not more, of a social issue as it is a linguistic problem; a language cannot be sexist or discriminating, it is in the hands of the societies who speak it. The French language is constantly evolving. From starting off as a mere dialect of Latin in the 8th century to becoming a fully-fledged language spreading across a wide range of countries and geographical locations, French has changed greatly and still has the potential to evolve. With the rise of inclusive language and the need for representation and breaking biases through linguistic mediums, the fight for change is ongoing and continues to persist. This natural evolution does not put language into “mortal danger” as the Academy fears, it simply enriches it and allows attitudes to progress. Therefore, language will continue shaping society, as will society with language – a natural cycle that *l'Académie française* will never be able to disrupt.