

Convergence and Divergence on Gender Inclusive Language in France and Anglo/Australian Spheres

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1. Introduction

Gaining insights into a ‘languaculture’—broadly defined as the ties between a language and its associated dominant culture—is helped by finding ‘rich points’ of difference between that languaculture and another.² Comparison in that sense can allow for salient divergent and convergent threads to emerge on a given topic in two distinct linguistic and cultural spheres. This article aims to reveal some rich points of ideological divergence and convergence of gender inclusive language (hereafter GIL) between France and Australia as found in scholarly literature and the written press.

In this article GIL in France is explored in more depth than in Australia simply because it has attracted far more controversy in that country. Several reasons can explain this disparity. Firstly, and as will be shown, to become more gender inclusive French requires a lot more changes to grammaticality and the expansion of gender classifying categories³ than English which only

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¹ <https://www.rmit.edu.au/contact/staff-contacts/academic-staff/c/crozet-dr-chantal>.

² Michael Agar, *Language Shock: Understanding the Culture of Conversation* (New York: William Morrow, 2015).

³ Véronique Perry, ‘Genre et “conscience éthique” en classe de langue : un “droit au savoir” pour l’anglais à visée professionnelle’, *Recherche et pratiques pédagogiques en langues de spécialité* 32, no. 2 (2013): 27–45.

has ‘a pronominal gender system’.⁴ More changes can therefore be expected to attract more controversy. However, beyond linguistic barriers, this article argues that it is France’s historically loaded relationship with its national language and gender issues, in addition to the ideal of French universalism based on equality through sameness, which may explain to a great extent the fierce debates that have taken place on GIL in that country. In comparison, Australia’s multicultural ideology, based on equality through the respect of differences, coupled with the fact that English requires less work to achieve gender inclusivity, is more likely to focus on achieving gender equality and inclusivity as a general national societal agenda, with a lesser interest in GIL issues.

This article adheres to the broad definition of ‘ideology’ in its use of ‘ideological stance’ as encouraged by Maynard and Mildemberger: ‘a non-pejorative and broad concept that refers to a diverse range of idea systems that influence political and social thought and behavior ...’.⁵

Further, any discussion on comparative ideological stance on a given topic can be well served by including ideological representations embedded in both popular and institutional/academic discourses.⁶ This is because both forms of discourse tend to feed on each other in the resistance to social change, or its promotion, and particularly so when changes to everyday language use are a matter of public concern. By ‘discourse’ we mean public debates, popular voices and opinions from the majority of people as heard in the press, and by ‘institutional/academic discourse’ we mean government voices as well as the discourse of scholars that is, for this article, the literature on GIL.

In France and Australia both popular and government/academic discourses on gender issues, including on GIL, find voice in the press. For this reason, the study presented in the third part of this article draws on a collection of press articles covering debates on GIL mainly from 2017 onwards. The rationale for selecting this time bracket is explained below.

⁴ Peter Siemund, *Pronominal Gender in English: A Study of English Varieties from a Cross-Linguistic Perspective* (London: Routledge, 2013), 2.

⁵ Jonathan Leader Maynard and Matto Mildemberger, ‘Convergence and Divergence in the Study of Ideology: A Critical Review’, *British Journal of Political Science* 48, no. 2 (2018): 578.

⁶ Maynard and Mildemberger, ‘Convergence and Divergence’.

Section 2 discusses pertinent aspects of the history of language and gender issues, as relevant to French (in France) and English (in Australia) and gender inclusive language reform, showing points of convergence and divergence between the two. The following section introduces and presents the study and discusses its results. The concluding remarks argue that that the ideological divergences and convergences underpinning debates on GIL in France and Australia can be best understood through the prism of French universalism which values sameness over diversity to achieve equality, in contrast to Australian multiculturalism, which emphasises difference and diversity for the same purpose.

2. Convergence and divergence: on language and gender in French and English

France has a long history of fierce debate on the French language, dating back at least from 1539 when the Ordinance of Villers-Cotterêts imposed French in all public documents. From then on, the country has continued to invest in a unified and regulated language as a matter at the heart of national identity, considering any suggested changes to French very seriously and passionately. There is, in France, what Bourdieu and Boltanski⁷ once called a real ‘fétichisme de la langue’, nourished by a strong sentiment that French needs to be defended and protected at all costs. Whenever language matters surface, whether it be with regards to simplifying orthography or teaching in English in French universities, this defensive and protective sentiment is reactivated. Politicians, scholars, the press, and now anyone on social media, express their views taking sides for or against language change.

France is also known to have a long and difficult history of gender in language issues. The literature records key moments in the history of grammatical gender in France dating back to the seventeenth century when grammarians formalised the gender of words and established that the masculine form should prevail over the feminine form.⁸ For example,

⁷ Pierre Bourdieu and Luc Boltanski, ‘Le Fétichisme de la langue’, *Actes de la recherche en sciences sociales* 1, no. 4 (1975): 2–32.

⁸ Flora Bolter, “‘Le masculin l’emporte’: stratégies linguistiques et politiques de genre dans les associations LGBT+ en France”, in *Devenir non-binaire en français contemporain*, eds. Vinay Swamy and Louisa Mackenzie (Paris: Éditions Le Manuscrit, Collection Genre(s) et création, 2022), 21–43.

according to this rule, when one writes: *Des hommes et des femmes sont arrivés*, the past participle *arrivés* (arrived) must agree in gender with men and not women, which is closest to it, making the reference to women in the past participle linguistically invisible. As early as the late eighteenth century, in their *Requête des dames à l'Assemblée nationale*⁹ women demanded the end of the supremacy of the masculine over the feminine grammar rule.¹⁰ At the same time, women also demanded the right to vote, thereby connecting language and political power, but to no avail on both counts. In the late nineteenth century in France, public schooling was made compulsory and reinforced the supremacy of the masculine over the feminine rule, signalling the importance of education in the language regulating system.

Debates over the need to use the feminine form of occupational nouns and titles when addressing women started in English-speaking countries in the 1970s. In France, a government terminology commission for the feminisation of occupational nouns and titles was operative from 1984–1986. The famous French feminist Benoîte Groult, who presided over this commission, recalls in her autobiography¹¹ that the creation of this commission alone provoked ‘*un immense éclat de rire*’ across the left and right ranks of politics. She cites the journalist Jean Dutour, writing in the newspaper *France-Soir* at the time, in reference to the new commission, ‘*Au secours, voilà la clitocratie!*’.¹² In 1998, Jospin’s socialist government reaffirmed the importance of this initiative, and a year later the linguist Cerquiglini¹³ published one of the first guides in support of this work.

⁹ *Requête des dames à l'Assemblée nationale (Women's Petition to the National Assembly)*, 1790, Gallica Digital Library, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k426587>.

¹⁰ Eliane Viennot, *Non, le masculin ne l'emporte pas sur le féminin ! Petite histoire des résistances de la langue française* (Donnemarie-Dontilly: Éditions iXe, 2014), 74.

¹¹ Benoîte Groult, *Mon évason : Autobiographie* (Paris: Éditions Grasset & Fasquelle, 2008), 316.

¹² Translation: ‘Help, here comes clitocracy!’

¹³ Bernard Cerquiglini et al., *Femme, j'écris ton nom... : Guide d'aide à la féminisation des noms de métiers, titres, grades et fonctions* (Paris: INALF/CNRS Éditions, La Documentation française, 1999), 124.

However, it took the French Academy until 2019 to finally approve of the feminisation of occupational nouns and titles. The Academy represents only the most conservative views on language and gender issues in France. Still, its views are a marker of the slow progress any proposed changes to French tend to make.¹⁴

Whereas gender and queer studies emerged in the seventies in Australia,¹⁵ in France they only appeared as disciplines in their own right in the nineties, prompting academic literature and debates on gender issues in language. Therefore, whereas the field of ‘Language, Gender, and Sexuality (LGS)’ within anglophone contexts has become well established,¹⁶ research on the relationship between language and gender issues in France has generally tended to lag behind anglophone countries. Inclusive French, as debated today, can be thought of in terms of a spectrum of proposed language reforms, ranging from the expansion of feminisation to gender neutralisation. Inclusive English involves a narrower range of proposals for language change that have not provoked the same polarising debate.

2.1 Feminisation versus neutralisation

In the most recent literature, inclusive French, broadly referred to as *écriture inclusive* (inclusive writing), concerns changes to the French language beyond the feminisation of occupational nouns and titles. As discussed in more detail below, it involves the use of new morphosyntax and neologisms, aiming to either further feminise the language by making women extensively more visible in it, or to neutralise it by getting rid of masculine/feminine gender markers altogether, giving non-binary people more visibility. The term ‘non-binary’ is used in a generic sense as defined

¹⁴ Cerquiglini et al., *Femme, j’écris ton nom*.

¹⁵ Ann Curthoys, ‘Gender Studies in Australia: A History’, *Australian Feminist Studies* 15, no. 31 (2000): 19–38.

¹⁶ Lia Litosseliti, ‘Language, Gender and Sexuality: Reflections on the field’s ongoing critical engagement with the sociopolitical landscape’, *The Routledge Handbook of Language, Gender and Sexuality*, eds. Jo Anguri and Judith Baxter (London: Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, 2021), 323–337.

by Ashley¹⁷ referring to people who do not identify with any gender, or who identify with two genders (bi-gender), partial gender (semi-gender), or whose gender varies in time and according to context (gender fluid). The kind of linguistic changes to French that are now debated can therefore mark inclusivity in this double sense, in favour of more visibility for women and/or for non-binary people. In this sense, it is a new phenomenon of the twenty-first century, emerging in the context of the post #MeToo movement and the advent of socio-political movements lobbying for minority rights.

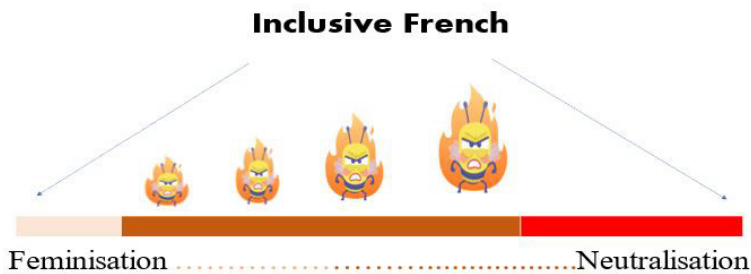


Figure 1: Inclusive French, from feminisation to neutralisation

Although the feminisation and the neutralisation of French broadly represent different sets of linguistic reforms with little overlap, the two are often not distinguished in the literature and the press. In the above diagram, the left end of the spectrum refers to the feminisation of occupational nouns and titles, for example: *une écrivaine* (an authoress) rather than ‘*une femme écrivain*’ (literally a female writer), *une pompière* (a firewoman), *la maire* (female city mayor). These forms are now more widely accepted, if not always used. It is a new morphosyntax, expanding the feminisation of French, such as the median point in, for example, ‘*Les Français·e·s*’, which has created societal and political uproar (the middle part with fiery figures in the above diagram). What neutralisation entails (see further discussion below) is not well known to the wider public, nor has it been commented upon extensively in the press, except for the new neutral pronoun ‘iel’ (the

¹⁷ Florence Ashley, ‘Qui est-ille? Le respect langagier des élèves non-binaires, aux limites du droit’, *Service social* 63, no. 2 (2018): 35–50.

equivalent of the singular ‘they’ in English) which was included in the Robert dictionary in November 2021.

The main official reference detailing newer strategies towards the expansion of the feminisation of French (rather than its neutralisation) was published in 2016 by Le Haut Conseil à l’Égalité entre les femmes et les hommes (hereafter HCE). This council was created by and is associated with the national consultative and independent institution in charge of protecting women’s rights and of promoting gender equality. Together they produced a practical guide¹⁸ titled: *Pour une communication publique sans stéréotype de sexe : Guide pratique*, making recommendations to government bodies to eliminate sexism in language by employing language strategies that go beyond the feminisation of occupational names and titles. This guide encourages strategies such as the use of non-abbreviated ‘doublets’, as in *les candidats et les candidates*, where both the masculine and feminine forms of a noun are used to refer to candidates rather than only the masculine form, *candidats*. The use of alphabetical order when referring to women and men is also recommended. So, for example, using *elles et ils* (female form of ‘they’ first and masculine form second) or the other way around: *tous et toutes*, placing the masculine/plural form of the indefinite pronoun ‘all’ first followed by its feminine form. Another recommendation of the HCE guide is to favour the use of epicenes where appropriate—words which can represent both genders, such as *les élèves, les personnes, les droits humains* (human rights, rather than the *droits de l’homme*), or *mots englobants* (encompassing words) like *le peuple* and *le public*.

Language change in French discussed so far aligns with the kind of feminist language reform that has taken place in English in anglophone countries like Australia, all triggered initially by women’s movements in the seventies and eighties across the Western world.¹⁹ It supports the increased visibility of women in language whilst questioning the ‘male as

¹⁸ *Pour une communication publique sans stéréotype de sexe : Guide pratique* (Paris: La documentation française, 2016), https://www.haut-conseil-egalite.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/guide_pour_une_communication_publicque_sans_stereotype_de_sexe_vf_2016_11_02.compressed.pdf.

¹⁹ Anne Pauwels, ‘Language planning, language reform and the sexes in Australia’, *Australian Review of Applied Linguistics* 10 (1993): 13–34.

norm' principle. However, at this date, Australia has been more proactive than France in the effective implementation of feminist language planning reform across many of its institutions.^{20 21} Coady²² notes that the assumed neutrality of the masculine in French has not been sufficiently questioned as yet, and that it contributes to delaying attempts at extending feminisation of the language.

Leaving aside the issue of effective implementation of feminist language reform, the recent uproar over GIL in France concerns particular newer strategies regarding the feminisation of French which do not apply to English. These include '*les formes appariées*' (coupled or matched words) that are contested today, and also the proximity rule, contested to a lesser degree. Coupled words, such as for instance, *Les candidat-e-s*, use the median dot (also called 'interpunct'), which is a dot floating halfway through the space between two letters allowing the inclusion of both the masculine and feminine forms of nouns and adjectives when referring to both males and females. The HCE recommends its use in writing only, as it is cumbersome to pronounce in speech. In speech, doublets are recommended instead. For example, in spoken French the doublet '*les candidates et les candidats*' can be used instead of '*les candidat-e-s*'. As well as the median dot, other orthographies are also experimented with for coupled words, such as the dot which is like a full-stop, hyphen, apostrophe, capital letter or brackets. There are some semantic issues with the coupled forms of some nouns as for instance in *dieu-déesse* (male and female forms of God) or *maître-maîtresse* (master-mistress), as both *déesse* and *maîtresse* are charged with different meanings semantically than the masculine forms *dieu* and *maître*. *Déesse* refers to specific representations of God rather than God itself, and *maîtresse* refers to 'mistress' the unlawful partner of a married man.

²⁰ Anne Pauwels and Joanne Winter, "Trajectories of Agency" and discursive identities in Education: a critical site in feminist language planning', *Current Issues in Language Planning* 17, no. 2–3 (2006): 171–198.

²¹ Anthony J. Liddicoat, 'Feminist language planning', *Current Issues in Language Planning* 12, no. 1 (2011): 1–7.

²² Ann Coady, 'La construction socio-discursive du masculin générique: discours et contre-discours', *Pratiques et Langages du genre et du sexe : déconstruire l'idéologie sexiste du binarisme*, eds. Sandra Tomc, Sophie Bailly and Grâce Ranchon (Paris: Éditions l'Harmattan, 2016), 79–98.

L'accord de proximité rejects the supremacy of the masculine over the feminine rule. In the following example: *des hommes et des femmes intelligentes*, the adjective 'intelligentes' is used for the feminine as it is closest to the noun 'women'. If the sentence had women first as in *des femmes and des hommes intelligents*, 'intelligents' in this case would be written in the masculine form as 'hommes' is closest to it. The proximity rule was commonly used in older French, prior to the seventeenth century, and was also documented in the work of Viennot,²³ who argues that not all current proposals to feminise French are new.

The HCE also mentions the use of new French pronouns, but does not make its support for them very explicit. It simply says it is a recent trend in France and refers only to the new third person subject pronoun *iel* as a blending of *il* (he) and *elle* (she). *Iel* has recently been incorporated into the Robert online dictionary, reinvigorating debates on French GIL as will be discussed below. For some non-binary people, *iel* is too much a blend of gender rather than its neutralisation, for others it is acceptable as a form of both feminisation and/or gender neutralisation. *Elllui* (shehe) has also been proposed for the indirect object pronoun blending *elle* (she) and *lui* (him). The indirect object pronoun only exists in the masculine form in French as *lui* (him or her). So whether you want to say 'I ring him' or 'I ring her' the only option in French is to use the masculine form 'lui' (him) as in *je lui téléphone*.

2.2 Neutralisation

No official guides have been produced in support of the neutralisation of French, of the kind produced by the HCE for the feminisation of the language. Instead various linguists and groups or just individuals from the non-binary community have put forward their own guides. For instance, linguists such as Barasc and Causse,²⁴ Alpheratz²⁵ and Greco²⁶ have proposed neologisms to

²³ Viennot, *Non, le masculin ne l'emporte pas sur le féminin !*, 3.

²⁴ Katy Barasc and Michèle Causse, *Requiem pour il et elle* (Paris: Éditions iXe, 2014).

²⁵ Alpheratz, *Grammaire du français inclusif* (Châteauroux: Éditions Vent Solars, 2018).

²⁶ Luca Greco, 'Linguistic Uprisings: Toward a Grammar of Emancipation', *H-France Salon* 11, no. 14, #3 (2019): 1–13.

eliminate gender markers altogether. Bolter²⁷ noted that there is no consensus within the non-binary community itself over the usage of common neutral terms as yet and it is still very much an explorative adventure at this stage. Alpheratz,²⁸ for example, proposes neologisms such as *lumme* or *loemme* for *homme* (mankind); *baba* or *mapa* for *papa* and *maman*; *toncle* for *oncle* and *tante*, and *copan* or *copaine* for *copain* and *copine*. Greco²⁹ has proposed the subject pronouns *al*, *ol* or *ul* for ‘he’ or ‘she’, which do sound and read more neutral than *iel*. Greco also supports the use of neutral articles like *li* for *le* and *la* (the) and of the ‘alphalecte’ (*α*) as a gender-neutral marker, as in: *li étudiante est priva de moyens* in lieu of *l’étudiant-e est privé-e de moyens*.³⁰ For Greco,³¹ neutral French helps focus on subjects unmarked by gender.

Michèle Causse (2000) created a new language, ‘alphalecte’, a common language respectful of all the speakers that ‘allows us to speak as subjects and not as gendered individuals’. The Greek letter α (alpha), the symbol of a new humanity (what Causse calls the ‘néo-espèce Sapiens’), is used to short-circuit the binary gendered forms in nouns, adjectives, and verbs, in opposition to the ‘androlecte’, named from the Greek word *andro* (man).

The neutralisation of French at this stage remains an experiment for some linguists and activists within the non-binary community. In anglophone countries such as Australia, the gender-neutral language push of the last decade pertains to what Litosseliti³² refers to as the fourth wave of ‘... digitally driven, sex-positive, queer, #MeToo, inter-generational feminism’. Some members of this movement are proposing contested neologisms such as ‘birthgivers’ and ‘pregnant people’ to replace the word ‘mothers’; and ‘chestfeeding’ to replace ‘breastfeeding’. More widely known and accepted is the use of ‘they’ as ‘a generic, non-sexist third person singular pronoun’.³³

²⁷ Bolter, “‘Le masculin l’emporte””.

²⁸ Alpheratz, *Grammaire du français inclusif*.

²⁹ Greco, ‘Linguistic Uprisings’.

³⁰ The student lacks the means.

³¹ Greco, ‘Linguistic Uprisings’, 4.

³² Litosseliti, ‘Language, Gender and Sexuality’, 324–325.

³³ Tania E. Strahan, “‘They’ in Australian English: Non-Gender-Specific or Specifically Non-Gendered?”, *Australian Journal of Linguistics* 28, no. 1 (2018): 17–29.

As such ‘they’ is meant to refer to ‘... individuals with unknown gender and when a random allocation of gender is undesirable’.³⁴ However, research on the impact of the use of ‘they’ as a neutral singular pronoun has shown that it comes at the cost of clarity of meaning because it violates rules of grammar.³⁵ Other gender third person pronouns such as ‘ze’ (subject) and ‘hir’ (object) have also been proposed as in ‘ze laughed’ and ‘I called hir’.³⁶ Nonetheless as noted by Moser and Devereux,³⁷ novel gender-neutral pronouns proposed in English so far tend to be problematic, as they are ‘hard to learn and pronounce’ and ‘feel awkward’, hence deterring widespread use.

As noted by Rabatel and Rosier,³⁸ the extent of the latest proposals to further feminise French in France are still not well known to the wider public. In 2021, a national survey on French inclusive writing, conducted by the IFOP (Institut Français d’Opinion Publique) for *L’Express* magazine, showed that 66% of the French population had never heard of it or had heard of it but did not quite know what it was. The remaining 34% knew about it and what it entailed, and 57% out of the 34% were tertiary educated.³⁹

³⁴ Ruth Filik, Anthony J. Sanford, Catherine Emmott, Lorna Morrow and Hartmut Leuthold, *Pronouns without antecedents: The processing cost of “Institutional They”*, New York, USA (Poster presented at CUNY Conference on Sentence Processing, March 2006).

³⁵ Julie Foertsch and Morton A. Gernsbacher, ‘In search of gender neutrality: Is singular They a cognitively efficient substitute for generic He?’, *Psychological Science* 8 (1997): 106–111.

³⁶ Lai Zimman, ‘Transgender language reform: some challenges and strategies for promoting trans-affirming, gender-inclusive language’, *Journal of Language and Discrimination* 1, no. 1 (2017): 84–105, <https://doi.org/10.1558/jld.33139>.

³⁷ Charles Moser and Maura Devereux, ‘Gender neutral pronouns: A modest proposal’, *International Journal of Transgenderism* 20, no. 2–3 (2016): 1–2.

³⁸ Alain Rabatel and Laurence Rosier (coord.), ‘Le discours et la langue. Revue de linguistique française et d’analyse du discours, tome 11.1 : Les défis de l’écriture inclusive’, *LIDIL: Revue de linguistique et de didactique des langues* 62 (2020): 187. <https://doi.org/10.4000/lidil.8246>.

³⁹ ‘Les Français ne parlent pas “woke”’, *IFOP Survey* (Paris, 2021), <https://www.ifop.com/publication/notoriete-et-adhesion-aux-theses-de-la-pensee-woke-parmi-les-francais/>.

Another recent study conducted by *Mots Clés* in 2021, using Google Trends and Google Surveys, indicates that the majority of French people are in favour of the feminisation of occupational names and titles but not in favour of coupled forms,⁴⁰ women aged between 18–24 being twice as likely to be in favour of the latter. In comparison, in early 2021 the Australian TV Channel SBS reported on an opinion poll conducted by Pollinate and Fifty Acres showing that ‘two thirds of Australians support gender-neutral choice’ in language.⁴¹ There was, however, a significant gender split with more women agreeing with the concept of gender-inclusive language, as well as a nuanced generational gap showing three in four 18–24 year olds in favour of gender-neutrality and ‘a high acceptance among baby boomers aged 55 to 64’. These comparative results need to be interpreted with caution. Nonetheless they indicate some divergence between France and Australia in the level of acceptance of GIL, suggesting that France is still coming to terms with understanding and accepting the full extent of what GIL in French can entail, whereas Australia is ahead in terms of general acceptance of gender-neutral language choice in English. Significantly, in both countries, acceptance of GIL is led by women, showing convergence on that point.

Having discussed some key points of convergence and divergence on language and gender histories and GIL in French and English, the next section of this article will present a study of GIL debates in the French and Australian press.

3. Debates on GIL in France and Australia: underpinning ideological stance

A qualitative study was designed to identify key ideological trends underpinning debates on GIL in the French press and to subsequently compare these to ideological trends in debates on English GIL in the Australian press, aiming to answer the following research question:

To what extent can debates on GIL in France and Australia inform on fundamental differences between the two countries’ relationship to language and gender issues?

⁴⁰ <https://www.motscles.net/etude-ecriture-inclusive> .

⁴¹ <https://www.sbs.com.au/news/article/two-thirds-of-australians-support-gender-neutral-choice-survey-finds/60g2ipn05> .

The data and data collection process, the approach to data analysis and limitations of the study are presented first, followed by results and discussion.

3.1 Data and data collection

Sixty-six articles were collected first from a selection of French digital press published between 2017 and early 2022 when an unprecedented public outcry erupted in France over the use of GIL. The first peak of the debate followed Hatier's⁴² publication of a new textbook in France in 2017 for first-year high-school students, using inclusive writing based on the recommendations of the HCE. It is Hatier's use of the dot to ensure the feminine form is made visible in occupational nouns (see figure 2) which provoked a societal uproar. The latest debate, though not as fierce, was sparked in late 2021 when the neutral pronoun *iel* was included in the online Robert dictionary, as already mentioned.



Figure 2: Illustration of Hatier's use of GIL in a textbook

The author of this article, a French native speaker, relied on her familiarity with the political orientation of the French press to select articles from newspapers and magazines representing a wide range of current political orientations in France. Apart from *Front populaire* and *The Conversation*, the newspapers and magazines in figure no. 3 are examples of the French

⁴² Hatier, a well-known French publishing house specialising in scholarly works and educational materials, is now part of the Hachette group.

press known to the majority of French people. *Front populaire* is a recent quarterly magazine founded in 2020 by the philosopher Michel Onfray, promoting ‘souverainisme’ (sovereignty) and claiming to stand outside the traditional right/left political divide and to be against a global economic order which is in the service of capitalism and universal government. *Marianne* also claims, since 2018, to adhere to this new movement. *The Conversation* is a non-profit online publishing site offering ‘research-based news and analysis’.⁴³ Originally founded in 2011 by a group of academics in Australia and New Zealand, it now has a counterpart edition in France (and other countries) and was thus deemed a good source of comparative data.

A google search was conducted, searching for articles on ‘écriture inclusive’ and ‘français inclusif’ for each year between January 2017 and December 2022. The articles collected are intended to be indicative and not exhaustive of different views. The author’s subscription to several of the newspapers or magazines selected made it easier to access full articles. The selection of other articles depended partly on their full free access online.

| Source | No. | Political Orientation | Source | No. | Political Orientation |
|--|-----|-----------------------|--------------------------|-----------|---------------------------|
| <i>Le Monde</i> | 10 | Centre left | <i>Marianne</i> | 2 | Sovereignist (since 2018) |
| <i>The Conversation</i> (French Edition) | 12 | Left | <i>Front populaire</i> | 4 | Sovereignist |
| <i>La Croix</i> | 2 | Catholic left | <i>L'Express</i> | 8 | Right/Centre right |
| <i>Médiapart</i> | 3 | Left | <i>Le Figaro</i> | 8 | Right |
| <i>L'Obs</i> | 4 | Left | <i>Le Point</i> | 1 | Right |
| <i>Le Parisien</i> | 5 | Neutral | <i>Valeurs actuelles</i> | 7 | Extreme right |
| | | | Total | 66 | |

Figure 3: Sources of French data

⁴³ <https://theconversation.com/au/who-we-are>.

Subsequently, after a google search on ‘inclusive English in Australia’ or ‘gender inclusive language in Australia’, forty-one articles were selected from the Australian press from three sources: *The Guardian* (Australia), *The Conversation* and *The Australian*. Significantly, *The Guardian* and *The Conversation* had the highest number of articles on GIL. The Australian data contain articles published earlier than 2017 as they were found relevant to the study.

| Source | No. | Political Orientation |
|---|-----------|-----------------------|
| <i>The Guardian</i> | 16 | Centre left |
| <i>The Conversation</i> (Australian edition) | 16 | Left |
| <i>The Australian</i> | 9 | Centre right |
| Total | 41 | |

Figure 4: Sources of Australian data

In total 107 articles were collected. The French articles were sourced from a wider range of newspapers and magazines as France was the original focus of the study, and also simply because more articles were published on GIL in France than in Australia. The Australian articles were collected from sources that could be matched in terms of political orientation, with a French counterpart, even if only approximately, to assist with a more reliable comparative analysis of views. *The Guardian* can be equated with *Le Monde*, the two sites of *The Conversation* in France and Australia are naturally matched, and *The Australian* can be equated with *L'Express*.

Approach to data analysis

Critical discourse analysis (CDA) and thematic analysis were used for data analysis which for this article focuses primarily on the headlines.

CDA was used as the main theoretical backbone for data analysis, particularly the work of Van Dijk and Maingueneau on media as discourse and of Fairclough on discourse. Van Dijk⁴⁴ ⁴⁵ argues that the headlines

⁴⁴ Teun A. Van Dijk, *News Analysis: Case Studies of International and National News in the Press* (Hillsdale, N. J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, 1988).

⁴⁵ Teun A. Van Dijk, ‘Opinions and Ideologies in the Press’, *Approaches to Media Discourse*, eds. Allan Bell and Peter Garrett (Oxford: Blackwell, 1998), 21–63.

announcing themes and topics shape the type of discourse a given press article wishes to represent in a given area of societal interest, and also what the readers will remember best from it. He also notes that readers tend to adopt a journalist's views on a topic unless they have sufficient knowledge to read it critically. Press articles on gender inclusive language, a topic which, as argued earlier, most readers, at least in France, know little about, can therefore have a major ideological impact on a population. The French discourse analyst Maingueneau⁴⁶ also suggests that there are usually two levels of texts: shorter texts such as titles of articles which summarise the key point on a topic, meant to catch readers' attention, and texts in smaller print providing further analysis. To succeed in catching and keeping the reader's interest, words in the title and text of a press article have to resonate with the social, cultural and political context readers inhabit. The analysis of the titles (and texts) of articles on GIL in France and Australia can therefore be indicative of what lies in the national consciousness (or unconsciousness) of both nations in a particular domain.⁴⁷ For Fairclough⁴⁸, '... discourse is language in its relations with other elements in the social process' and social processes are inherent to the historical contexts in which they unfold. Hence analysing how language behaves in media discourse can also provide historical insights into a particular topic.

Thematic analysis was used to identify and codify themes recurring in both the titles and texts of the collected articles. Thematic analysis is used commonly in qualitative studies to systematically examine, codify and interpret patterns in texts whilst retaining the complexity of meaning.⁴⁹ ⁵⁰

⁴⁶ Dominique Maingueneau, *Analyser les Textes de Communication* (Paris: Armand Colin, 2016).

⁴⁷ Chantal Crozet, 'Insights into France's Relationship to Religion(s) and Spirituality', *The International Journal of Civic, Political, and Community Studies* 16, no. 1 (2018): 27–39.

⁴⁸ Norman Fairclough, *Language and Power* (New York: Routledge, 2015), 8.

⁴⁹ Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke, 'Using thematic analysis in psychology', *Qualitative Research in Psychology* 3, no. 2 (2006): 77–101.

⁵⁰ Greg Guest, Kathleen MacQueen and Emily E. Namey, *Applied Thematic Analysis* (Thousand Oaks, California: Sage Publications, 2012).

A ‘Keyword In Context’ approach (KWIC)⁵¹ was used initially for the analysis of titles and texts of the articles to help identify the ideological stance they embedded. In the presentation and discussion of results, quotes from the articles refer back to the coded name of the newspaper or magazine as shown below, followed by the date of publication (e.g. MON 26/12/2017 for *Le Monde* 26/12/2017):

| | | | | | |
|---|--------|--------------------------|-------|--|--------|
| <i>Le Monde</i> | MON | <i>Marianne</i> | MAR | <i>The Guardian</i> | GUARD |
| <i>The Conversation</i> (French Edition) | CON.fr | <i>Front populaire</i> | FR.PO | <i>The Conversation</i> (Aust. Edition) | CON.au |
| <i>La Croix</i> | CROIX | <i>L'Express</i> | EXP | <i>The Australian</i> | AUS |
| <i>Médiapart</i> | MEDIA | <i>Le Figaro</i> | FIG | | |
| <i>L'Obs</i> | OBS | <i>Le Point</i> | PT | | |
| <i>Le Parisien</i> | PARI | <i>Valeurs actuelles</i> | VI.AC | | |

Figure 5: Table of codes to refer to articles from the collected data

3.3 Limitations of the study

The study is limited to debates on GIL in France and Australia as reported in a selection of articles and from the written press only. As such, it can only provide indicative results. It does not include the numerous and ongoing debates on GIL that have occurred/are still occurring on social media platforms where members of non-binary communities tend to be more vocal. The Australian data is limited to only three sources and would need to be expanded for more conclusive results. Preliminary results are presented and discussed based on the first phase of data analysis with a focus on the analysis of the titles of the selected articles.

3.4 Results and discussion

General findings are presented and discussed first, followed by results and discussion from the French data and the Australian data. All results are brought together in the concluding remarks.

⁵¹ Guest, MacQueen and Namey, *Applied Thematic Analysis*.

3.4.1 General findings

Three main themes were identified under general findings offering preliminary comparative insights into the data from a macro analytical perspective.

GIL more controversial in France

Fifteen of the titles in the French data, against six in the Australian data, are worded as questions, a difference which, despite the smaller Australian dataset, is statistically significant: 23% of titles in the French set as compared to 15% in the Australian. This suggests that GIL in France is a more unsettled and controversial issue than in Australia. In the French titles, and notably across the range of articles, regardless of political affiliation, GIL is being questioned for its potential negative impact on the French language or society at large: is GIL a ‘péril’, echoing the words of the French Academy?⁵² Should it be prohibited? How risky is it for teachers to use? Is it really progressive?:

‘Débat: L’écriture inclusive, “un péril mortel”, vraiment ?’ (CON.fr 8/11/2017)⁵³

‘Faut-il interdire l’écriture inclusive?’ (CROIX 24/02/2021 and Fr.po 16/04/21 same title)⁵⁴

‘Écriture inclusive: que risquent les profs refusant que “le masculin l’emporte”?’ (EXP 9/11/2017)⁵⁵

‘L’écriture inclusive est-elle vraiment progressiste?’ (MED 2/07/2018)⁵⁶

‘Écriture inclusive: La langue française, patrimoine en péril?’ (VI.AC 18/12/2018)⁵⁷

⁵² Marie-Estelle Pech, ‘Pour l’Académie, l’écriture inclusive est un “peril mortel”’, *Le Figaro*, October 10, 2017.

⁵³ Debate: inclusive writing, ‘a mortal peril’, really?

⁵⁴ Should inclusive writing be prohibited?

⁵⁵ Inclusive writing: What do teachers, who deny that the masculine takes precedence over the feminine, risk?

⁵⁶ Inclusive writing: Is it really progressive?

⁵⁷ The French language, is our heritage at risk?

In comparison, six titles, worded as questions, were found in the Australian data, and only in *The Conversation.au* or the *Guardian*. Further, these questions referred to the use of gender-neutral pronouns only, calling for their endorsement. These results suggest that GIL is a more settled issue in Australia and more a matter of increasing its usage rather than questioning its legitimacy (at least regarding neutral pronouns):

‘What are gender pronouns and why is it important to use the right ones?’
(CON.au 15/10/2021)

‘If someone wants to be called ‘they’ and not ‘he’ or ‘she’, why say no?’
(GUARD 4/06/2018)

No questioning titles were found in *The Australian* which, as will be shown further, is indicative of more resistance to GIL in this newspaper.

Interest in language issues differs across the two countries

The fact that the large majority of articles relating to GIL in Australia were found in *The Guardian* and *The Conversation.au* indicates that language matters may appeal to a more educated and progressive readership in that country,⁵⁸ whereas the French data show an interest in language across societal divides. This finding corroborates the argument made earlier that language matters in France are of interest to the majority because they are linked to matters of national identity, whereas this is less the case in Australia. Interestingly, four articles in the Australian data, all from *The Guardian*, refer to GIL in France, a marker of its academically and globally minded readership, but also of anglophone fascination with France’s obsession with its national language, as illustrated below:

⁵⁸ *The Guardian* (Australian edition) claims that 41% of its readership is ‘degree qualified’ and 66% ‘progressive’ (see: <https://advertising.theguardian.com/au/advertising/audience>). *The Conversation* claims that 85% of its readers are non-academic which supports ‘our vision of sharing academic knowledge direct with the public’. The other main sectors represented in its readership are teaching/education (13%), healthcare/medical (10%) and government/policy (13%), <https://theconversation.com/au/audience#:~:text=Readership,and%2063.8%20million%20through%20publication>.

‘The French protect their language like the British protect their currency’ (GUARD 24/05/2013)

‘French language watchdogs say “non” to gender-neutral style’ (GUARD 4/11/2017)

‘Académie Française allows feminisation of job titles’ (GUARD 28/10//2019)

GIL linked to intrusion of ‘woke’ ideology

The French data show that debates around GIL issues in France evolved between 2017 and 2022, increasingly linking GIL to the perceived negative invasion of ‘woke’ ideology in the country. The Merriam-Webster⁵⁹ defines being ‘woke’ as ‘aware of and actively attentive to important facts and issues (especially issues of racial and social justice)’. Wikipedia⁶⁰ notes that the word ‘woke’ has evolved since the 2010s and that: ‘it came to encompass a broader awareness of social inequalities such as sexism, and has also been used as shorthand for left-wing ideas involving identity politics and social justice...’ Markedly and comparatively, fewer references to the negative impact of ‘woke’ ideology linked to GIL were found in the Australian data. Further, these were found largely in *The Australian* rather than in *The Guardian* or *The Conversation.au*. These results are unpacked further in the discussion below.

3.4.2 Findings from the French data

The themes identified in the French data were gathered under three categories: ‘against, ‘in-between’ and ‘for’ GIL, as shown in figure 6. The relevance of traditional political affiliations in the data analysis was found less relevant than expected. A more relevant distinction could be made between ‘language purists’ and ‘language progressives’, terms adopted in this article to refer to those who defend traditional usage as opposed to those who advocate reform. Language purists tend to lean more towards the extreme right, the right and centre right, the centre left and the new sovereigntist sides of politics. ‘Language progressives’, those in favour of GIL, tend to come from the traditional left side of politics as pointed

⁵⁹ <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/woke> .

⁶⁰ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Woke> .

out in the *Valeurs actuelles* article titled ‘Les médias de gauche, ces propagandistes de l’écriture inclusive’ (VI.AC. 02/03/2021).⁶¹

Both language purists and language progressives share some common concerns classified as ‘in-between’ in figure 6. Linguists’ views on GIL were found in all camps, indicating that all sides wish to invoke the authority of linguists to support their arguments.

| Against | In-between | For |
|--|--|--|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The masculine gender is generic/ includes women. • Aberration/threat to the French language • Threat to French identity • Deters from learning French globally • Not enough to promote gender equality • An imposition from ‘woke’ progressives | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Clutters meaning • Makes it hard to read • Makes it impossible to pronounce • Discriminates • Complicates French/ Goes against the grain | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • There is no gender neutrality in French • The masculine gender dominates • GIL is not new • Gives women visibility • Promotes gender equality • Works against sexism • Creates new non-sexist habits • Challenges stereotypes |

Figure 6: Arguments for, in-between and against French GIL

Arguments against GIL

Language purists tend to be against the newest strategies of GIL as discussed above. They also maintain that the masculine gender in French is both masculine and generic, and that when it is used generically it includes women and is therefore inclusive. *Valeurs actuelles* claims that the masculine gender in French is not only neuter, it also ‘unites’ the masculine and the feminine genders, arguably a subtle hint that the French language is meant to unite French people, not to ‘reduce’ them in any way:

⁶¹ The Left-wing media, these propagandists of inclusive writing.

‘Le neutre, qui existait en latin, prend la forme en français du masculin, genre indifférencié, non marqué. Il ne réduit pas, il réunit.’ (VI.AC. 18/12/2017)⁶²

Other arguments in the AGAINST camp are that GIL threatens the purity of the French language perceived to need to remain unchanged in order to keep its unifying value. Changing the language is therefore implied to also impact negatively on the maintenance of one common national identity. Further, as GIL is undeniably adding complexity to French, it is perceived as making it less attractive (i.e more difficult) to learn globally, hence leading to the diminishing of France’s influence in the world. The most virulent complaints about GIL are that it is not a means to achieve gender equality, and that other more important measures are required to that end. Finally, GIL is contested by some of its opponents, regardless of political affiliation, who accuse ‘woke’ ideology coming from the USA to have taken over (pris le pouvoir) and to be inappropriately applied to a French context, especially on French university campuses, as evidenced in the following articles:

‘Théorie du genre et écriture inclusive ont pris le pouvoir au CNRS: le cri d’alarme d’un chercheur’ (FIG 04/02/2019)⁶³

‘Comment l’écriture inclusive prend le pouvoir à l’université’ (FIG 18/10/2021)⁶⁴

‘Théories sur le genre et la race, “wokisme”... Tout comprendre à la nouvelle bataille culturelle’ (EXP 06/03/2021)⁶⁵

At the core of the AGAINST camp’s fear of ‘woke’ ideology linked to GIL is the fear of the eventual cancellation of gender differentiation in the language and in society. This is clearly evidenced in a *Valeurs actuelles* article which goes as far as accusing GIL of ‘emasculating’ and destroying the French language:

⁶² The neuter form, which existed in Latin, takes the form in French of the masculine, undifferentiated, ‘unmarked’ gender. It does not reduce, it unites.

⁶³ Gender theory and inclusive writing have seized power at the CNRS (National Centre of Scientific Research).

⁶⁴ How inclusive writing is seizing power in universities.

⁶⁵ Gender and race theory, ‘wokism’.... Understanding the new cultural battle.

‘Démasculiniser, bannir les expressions fondées sur les stéréotypes de genre... Comment l’écriture inclusive veut détruire la langue française’ (VI.AC. 16/07/2020)⁶⁶

In-between arguments

The in-between camps bring consensus from partisans of both the AGAINST and FOR camps on the following issues: GIL clutters meaning, making it also hard to read and pronounce French. Imposing its practice could lead to discrimination by creating a new division between those who know how to use it and those who do not. These arguments are illustrated in one of *Marianne*’s articles claiming that GIL imposes its views on language through propaganda and ‘exclude[s] disadvantaged speakers in the name of ideology’ (MAR 18/09/20). Another argument in this camp is that the complexification of French implied by GIL goes against the grain of language users who always seek simplification of language rather than making it more complex, rendering GIL therefore unviable in the long-term.

Arguments for GIL

Language progressives are for GIL. One of their arguments is that French was a lot more inclusive of at least women, if not of non-binary people, in the past and that it is only a matter of recovering this inclusivity rather than fully reinventing French. This argument is associated with the feminisation of occupational titles in particular, and also the proximity agreement, as discussed earlier. In the FOR camp, proponents contest the rule that the masculine is neutral and that it should prevail over the feminine. An article in *L’Obs*, for instance, claims that ‘Non, le masculin ne l’a pas toujours emporté sur le féminin’⁶⁷ and that another form of writing is indeed possible: ‘Inclusive: une autre écriture est possible’ (OBS 20/10/2017).⁶⁸

Le Monde also supports the argument that ‘masculinist ideologists’ consciously removed the feminine forms of occupational titles which had existed for centuries:

⁶⁶ Emasculate, banish expressions based on gender stereotypes... How inclusive writing wants to destroy the French language.

⁶⁷ No, the masculine has not always taken precedence over the feminine.

⁶⁸ Inclusive: another form of writing is possible.

‘Les noms “autrice”, “officière”, “professeuse”... existent depuis des siècles. Ils avaient juste été condamnés par des idéologues masculinistes’ (MON11/07/2019).⁶⁹

Other arguments in the FOR camp are that GIL does promote gender equality, and works against sexism by creating new non-sexist habits and challenging stereotypes.

What is also clear across the French data is the generation gap between feminist voices from an older generation who tend to be against the newest strategies of GIL, whereas younger feminists tend to favour ‘woke’ ideology and hence are more in favor of the more pronounced forms of GIL. Underpinning the resistance to GIL in France is the attachment to the ideals of republican universalism which is based, in theory, on the promotion of a neutral citizen, and favours achieving equality through sameness rather than acceptance of diversity. This attachment is at play in struggles to accept GIL’s altering of French through gender diversification. As noted in the following article from *The Conversation.fr*: ‘Dans un contexte républicain qui défend l’universalisme, toute émanation d’un individu singulier devient insupportable’ (CON.fr 19/01/2022).⁷⁰

3.4.3 Summary of key findings from the Australian data

The Australian data show wide support in favour of GIL, particularly of the neutral pronoun ‘they’, perceived as helping the deconstruction of gender roles and hence promoting equality between genders. It is also perceived as supporting gender neutrality, as evidenced in the following articles from *The Conversation.au* and *The Guardian*:

‘They: the singular pronoun that could solve sexism in English’ (GUARD 05/05/2016)

‘Using “she” and “he” reinforces gender roles and discrimination of women’ (CONV.fr 08/03/2018)

⁶⁹ Nouns such as ‘female writer’, ‘female officer’, ‘female professor’... have existed for centuries. They were just condemned by masculinist ideologists.

⁷⁰ In a republican context that proclaims universalism, any emergence of a unique individual becomes intolerable.

‘Yes words can harm young trans people. Here’s what we can do to help’ (CONV.au 15/02/2022)

‘So your friend came out as non-binary: here’s how to use pronouns they/them’ (GUARD 20/01/2020)

Data from *The Australian* newspaper show a markedly more critical stance towards GIL, including towards the use of the singular ‘they’ and new gender-neutral epicenes (e.g. ‘chestfeeding’ for ‘breastfeeding’) as illustrated below:

‘They Day slammed as “political correctness gone mad”’ (AUS 19/12/2015)

‘Trans-inclusive language is erasing women’s biology’ (AUS 16/12/2019)

‘Fair dinkum, preferred gender pronouns have emerged as a measure of one’s wokeness’ (AUS04/04/2019)

“‘Chestfeeding’ push shows it’s time to tackle identity politics ‘nonsense’ (AUS 07/05/2021)

As in the French data, partisans against GIL in Australia, represented in *The Australian*’s articles, take a firm ideological stance based on resisting non-gender differentiation. They blame ‘wokeness’ or the ‘... cultural Left’s political correctness movement’, defined in the following terms in an article from *The Australian*:

... the cultural LEFT’s political correctness movement. A movement that is subverting the English language and enforcing identity and victim politics to implement its neo-Marxist, postmodern ideology in areas as diverse as gender and sexuality, multiculturalism and the benefits of Western civilization (AUS 12/04/2019)

The Australian data are indicative of divergent ideological positions underpinning opinions on GIL. However more extensive research on GIL in an Australian context would be required to comment further on the cultural and socio-political origins of this divergence.

4. Concluding remarks

From this study it can be concluded that French and Australian societies converge, in that they are both being challenged by the push for more

gender inclusive language. However, linguistic challenges to achieve gender inclusivity in French are much more complex and extensive than they are in English. This explains in part the much more intense level of public debate on GIL in France than in Australia, a point of divergence between the two countries. Nonetheless, in both countries, media discourse on GIL shows that it is fundamentally an ideological discourse that can be found across the political spectrum from the far right to the far left. At stake in this discourse are fundamental beliefs on the role of language in shaping gender relations, gender identity and the acceptance or rejection of gender neutrality. These beliefs can be better understood when considered through the prism of French universalism versus Australian multiculturalism, as this article has sought to demonstrate.

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