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Marie Loison-Leruste, Gwenaëlle Perrier

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Marie Loison-Leruste and Gwenaëlle Perrier

An “exclusionary language”? The soundness, sincerity, and motivations of arguments against inclusive writing

Since fall 2017, a new argument has appeared in the controversy over “inclusive writing” claiming that it is doubly exclusionary: first, in relation to individuals, and specifically children, who will now struggle because of these new linguistic forms used in academic and militant feminist circles, and second, in relation to disabled individuals (with specific forms of cognitive impairment and vision impairment). These “exclusion” arguments have been formulated by political figures, by a few academics and teachers, by representatives of disability organizations, and even by the former French minister of national education, Jean-Michel Blanquer. After receiving little attention in the fall of 2017, they became the main arguments against inclusive writing when the debate reignited in September 2020.

There are several reasons to call into question the soundness, sincerity, and ultimately, the use of these exclusion arguments. The first argument, which claims that non-sexist language is only for the academic and militant elite, can be factually refuted. Numerous civil services, regional governments, companies, and activist groups and trade unions use it. Furthermore, this argument implies, with a certain degree of contempt, that French speakers do not have the intellectual capacity to figure it out. If such an assertion is not supported by any research, it only contributes to the current climate of anti-intellectualism and to the lack of respect for feminist activism. Additionally, to claim that non-sexist language is “exclusionary,” “illegible,” or “incredibly complicated” by reducing it to the use of midpoints and neologisms, is to ignore scientific research highlighting the possible semantic and pedagogical benefits of using a demasculinized language. Such language use makes it possible, first and foremost, to be more precise. The use of the generic masculine leads to misunderstandings or a lack of understanding, as exemplified by the surgeon riddle,¹ for example, or the use of the word “man” to refer to all human beings (Franck 2020). Demasculinized language is also more logical and simpler to learn: it is easier to understand that nouns consist of stems with different suffixes for feminine and masculine forms² than to understand feminine

¹ The street survey conducted by EgaliGone demonstrates the androcentrism of social representations driven by language <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YebfaWkng9s>. In the “surgeon riddle,” respondents hear a generic masculine (*le chirurgien*) and tend to assume that it refers to a man, which hinders their ability to solve the riddle.

² For example, *un commerçant* (masculine noun) becomes *une commerçante* (feminine noun), while *un prophète* becomes *une prophétesse*. For a full explanation, see <https://grammar.collinsdictionary.com/french-easy-learning/how-do-you-make-masculine-nouns-into-feminine-nouns-in-french>.

nouns as derivatives of masculine nouns (Chevalier 2016). Given that the social and democratic issues involved in the education of school children are not to be ignored, it is striking that there has not been a single in-depth study conducted into the ways in which school children learn this language. Meanwhile, various linguists' research projects have underlined that orthographic reforms to simplify spelling or rules of agreement for direct objects following the auxiliary verb "to have"³ are necessary steps in democratizing the instruction of French (see for example Candea and Véron 2019, 196 onward; Chervel 1977). Have we seen opponents of inclusive writing calling for these reforms? The opposite, in fact, seems to be true: "we have noticed that [these] opponents [...] are the same people who are strongly against orthographic reforms, and more generally against democratizing education" (Abbou *et al.* 2018).

The second argument for viewing inclusive language as "exclusionary" relates to concern for individuals who are blind or are sight impaired, on the basis that text-to-speech software cannot (yet) "read" the midpoints. But this type of software, which is already capable of reading hyphens, could be made to account for these innovations. This show of support for people with disabilities also seems somewhat insincere on the part of certain opponents of inclusive writing. Politician François Jolivet, who publicly denounced its exclusion of school children and people with disabilities in the preamble to his legislative bill,⁴ has not co-signed any of the twenty-eight bills supporting disability rights that have been filed since the start of the 2017 National Assembly term. The political instrumentalization of people with disabilities in the debate over non-sexist language has in fact been denounced by certain disabled individuals and disability organizations, following the example of the Réseau d'études handi-féministes (REHF) (Disabled Feminists Research Network).⁵

If the soundness and sincerity of these "exclusion" arguments are weak, it is because the arguments serve a different function from what they publicly claim. By implying that (gender) equality research generates inequalities (between social classes, between those with and without disabilities), they are using a classic strategy of reactionary rhetoric brought to light by Albert O. Hirschman (1991)—that of the negative effects of egalitarian policies. This strategy consists of delegitimizing the fight for gender equality by bringing it into conflict with other issues or concerns. It was used, for example, in the late 1990s during debates over gender parity, which was accused of not addressing the social inequalities commonly present in the political arena. It enables certain opponents of inclusive writing to avoid being too open or consistent in their opposition to gender equality, but it does not stop them from getting involved in the "bataille du

³ With the auxiliary verb *avoir* (to have), the spelling of the past participle changes to agree with a direct object pronoun placed before the auxiliary verb. An "e" is added if the pronoun is feminine and an "s" is added if it is plural. For a full explanation, see <https://www.lawlessfrench.com/grammar/agreement-with-direct-objects/>.

⁴ Legislative bill n° 3922 prohibiting the use of gender inclusive writing for legal entities in charge of a public service project, February 23, 2021.

⁵ <https://efigies-ateliers.hypotheses.org/5274>

genre” (“gender battle”) (Béraud 2021) beyond the issue of language. In this way, politician Julien Aubert, who co-signed the legislative bill about inclusive writing that was filed by François Jolivet, publicly announced his desire to participate in the 2019 “Manif pour tous” (“Protest for all”) against the bioethics bill, which proposed extending medically assisted reproduction to lesbian couples;⁶ he gained similar attention during the parliamentary debates on extending the concept of marriage to include same-sex couples through his opposition to this measure as well. This reference to exclusion as an argument against inclusive language is therefore probably not primarily concerned with the wellbeing of school children and people with disabilities, but rather, concerned with opposing the fight for equality and the political effort to dismantle the gendered nature of the French language. These arguments of exclusion, which can be seen in similar debates in Germany and Austria (Hergenhan 2020; Krondorfer 2018), ultimately reflect the changing balance of power between proponents and opponents of non-sexist language. In effect, feminist discourse, which has gained greater respect in recent years, has increased the public reach of arguments for inclusive language. The classic anti-feminist arguments have certainly not gone away (Loison-Leruste, Perrier, and Noûs 2020), but this increased reliance upon the argument of exclusion speaks to their diminishing support. Since it is less acceptable these days to openly oppose the rights of women and sexual minorities, reactionary movements have found a way, in the debate on inclusive language, to continue opposing feminist interests, and their use of these “exclusion” arguments has allowed them to build new alliances with those who are sincerely concerned about questions of disability and learning difficulties.

However, the pedagogical and inclusive issues raised by the use of non-sexist language are legitimate concerns. Questions about how certain aspects of this language could cause difficulties for school children or people with disabilities warrant a thorough investigation. But political stances claiming to standardize language on the basis of unfounded allegations do not contribute constructively to the debate. Observations reported by teachers who have used non-sexist language in the classroom suggest that “students are less fearful than adults when it comes to linguistic changes, and not so staunchly attached to the gender status quo” (Abbou *et al.* 2018, 1). These reports would benefit from further research in the fields of sociology, pedagogy, and linguistics, allowing for observations of how these linguistic aspects are taught and learned in the classroom. Such research can only come about from a constructive dialogue between science and politics, which, instead of discrediting the linguistic practices of everyone in favor of language becoming more egalitarian, would

⁶ https://www.liberation.fr/france/2019/08/30/presidente-de-lr-julien-aubert-l-outsider-conservateur_1748377/

collectively further the fight against inequalities relating to gender, social class, and disability.

Marie Loison-Leruste is a sociologist, associate professor of sociology at the Université Sorbonne Paris Nord, and researcher at the PRINTEMPS Laboratory. Her work focuses on the experiences of homeless women from a gendered perspective, and on the controversies and mobilizations surrounding gender inclusive language. Her recent publications include Rosane Braud and Marie Loison-Leruste, "Le sans-abrisme au féminin: Quand les haltes pour femmes interrogent les dispositifs d'urgence sociale," *Travail, Genre et Sociétés* 47 (2022); Marie Loison-Leruste, Rosane Braud, and Camille Noûs, "Professionnaliser les bénévoles: Le 'travail gratuit' au sein d'un dispositif pour femmes sans domicile," *Le Sociographe*, "Travail social et bénévolat, bénévolat et travail social?" no. 3 (2021): 79–92; Marie Loison-Leruste and Gwenaëlle Perrier, "Les trajectoires des femmes sans-domicile à travers le prisme du genre: Entre vulnérabilité et protection," *Déviance et société* 43, no. 1 (2019): 77–110.

Marie.loison-leruste@univ-paris13.fr

Gwenaëlle Perrier is an associate professor of political science at the Université Sorbonne Paris Nord, a researcher at the Institut de droit public, sciences politiques et sociales (IDPS) (Institute of Public Law and Political and Social Sciences), and a research fellow at the Laboratoire interdisciplinaire pour la sociologie économique (LISE) (Interdisciplinary Laboratory of Economic Sociology) in conjunction with the Centre national des arts et métiers (CNAM) (National Conservatory of Arts and Crafts). Her research analyzes, often from a Franco-German perspective, current public policies promoting gender equality, particularly with respect to their proponents and their promotion and implementation. Her recent publications include, in collaboration with Marie Loison-Leruste and Camille Noûs, "Inclusive Language as a Political Issue: A French Specificity? (Introduction)." Translated by Lucy Garnier. *Cahiers du genre* 69 (2020): 5–30; in collaboration with Pauline Delage, "Cross-Sectoral Training to Reduce Violence against Women: A New Feminist Opportunity?" *French Politics, Culture and Society* 18 (2020): 111–31.

perriergwen@yahoo.fr

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