

The Feminization of French Profession Nouns

Irene Yi

University of California, Berkeley

Introduction

Younger generations are critically affected by language teaching, and this teaching can have great sociolinguistic impacts on the world as they grow older (McCoubrey 2017). This paper examines the patterns of past language teaching, namely French gendered grammar teaching. French language teaching has historically enforced sexist and misogynistic views (Korbik 2011). As language teaching becomes more progressive, students are taught to challenge the rigid grammatical structures which have historically reflected binary gender roles (Groult 2000), enabling students of nonbinary gender to find grammatical forms within their language that correspond to their identity and empowering students to engage in movements combatting social inequality in their communities. I examine the history of gender inequality in the French language and the push for language reform today using interviews with scholars and publications by activists, linguists, and French language educators. I interviewed Sarah Christofides of the French Department at the University of California, Berkeley, a graduate student who has done extensive research into this field. We covered many topics, including grammatical rules and grammar reforms in French, the institution of the French Academy, and the textual visibility of women in historically male-dominated professions. Additionally, this paper argues for the further development of gender-inclusive language in grammatically gendered languages, such that nonbinary speakers of a grammatically gendered language are able to receive the same representations that is seen in the French language feminization movement. Lastly, the case of Québécois French is juxtaposed to French spoken in France and serves as an inspiration for the future direction in all Francophone countries.

1 A History of Gender Inequality in Language

Language change is almost always inevitable (Crystal 2002:75), regardless of how many protectional institutions are established. Without change, a language will stray increasingly far from the lives of its speakers. Globalization brings change ever more

rapidly with loan words, slang, and social movements. The French language is institutionally regulated by the *Académie Française* (French Academy). Members of the French Academy are called *les immortels* ‘the immortals.’ Further, the motto of this institution is *à l’immortalité* ‘to immortality.’ This provides an indication of how adamant the French Academy is in keeping their language unchanged. The French Academy was founded in 1634, and there have since been 732 *immortels*. Out of the 732 *immortels*, only nine are women, and the first woman was not even elected until 1980. Christofides (2018) hypothesizes that because women have scarcely been accepted into the French Academy, men in the Academy find it difficult to empathize with the plight of professional women in the French world (to be addressed in later sections). Thus, every petition regarding the feminization of professional nouns to the French Academy has been met with an abrupt and adamant denial. Christofides (2018) asserts that through this institutional protection by the French Academy, French grammar reflects the sexism present in society at any given point in time and the Academy further entrenches sexist views by refusing reform.

In the vein of grammatical gender, the French Academy has a history of fighting any modern view in linguistic attitudes, as if defending the language means defending the country from globalization and assimilation (Sonntag 2003:43). Such is the case with gendered nouns of French, in which the morphology and syntax of gender has become a social issue. The noun classes are merely ways to categorize words in a language, and the gender of a noun is not meant to constrain or confine the realities of human gender (Wittig 1985). However, because language plays such a large part in the human brain, gendered languages do influence the way speakers think about the respective human genders. Even the loosest interpretation of the Sapir-Whorf Hypothesis can support how the grammar and lexicon of a language changes the way a speaker perceives the world around them (Boroditsky & Gaby 2010). While there is a plethora of languages with grammatical gender that reflects societal gender roles (Korbik 2011), the French Academy institutionally enforces the rigidity of French gender with many sexist grammatical rules and reforms.

According to Mairi McLaughlin (2018) of the French Department at UC Berkeley and Sarah Christofides (2018), textual visibility of women and the historical suppression of feminine power is key to understanding sexism. In France, young girls were able to choose to attend school, but they were often taken out of the education system earlier than boys (Sonnet 1987). In addition, girls were not expected to attend

school for the purpose of assuming political office or leadership positions. As a result, many French profession nouns did not acquire a feminine form (Schafroth 2003). According to the French Academy, *professor* in French only has a masculine form (*un professeur*), and the institution does not accept the feminine form (*une professeure*), even though it follows the productive feminizing morphology. Whether the sexist ideology or the sexist language came first, it is clear that sexism in the French lexicon is still reinforced by the Academy.

This has spurred a divisive debate in France as well as other Francophone countries. French Canadian speech communities have been slightly more progressive on the issue, and Québécois lexicographers have actually added *une professeure* into dictionaries (Office de la Langue Française 2017), due in part to a Canadian consciousness on democratizing professional word forms to include more genders. However, the issue goes beyond mere orthographic changes. The French Academy has maintained formidable influence in its traditional, conservative ideology, which has proved far more difficult to combat for people living in France than in Canada. Many feminists have countered the French Academy's stubbornness by simply adopting the masculine professional nouns, thereby promoting the notion that women can hold the same title, literally, as men. Still others disagree (Fleischman 1997), arguing that in either case, people who identify as nonbinary are left out of the conversation. As French does not have a grammatically neutral or ambiguous pronoun, this issue is harder to solve, though Wittig (1985) has laid the foundation for gender-inclusive linguistic forms in grammatically gendered languages.

Christofides (2018) explains that French grammatical gender should only have a purely syntactic and morphological role. Non-human nouns are fairly simple, such as *maison* 'house' (fem.), whose gender is only affected by morphological agreement with determiners, participles, and adjectives. However, human nouns are more complicated. Christofides (2018) discusses the differences in grammatical rules before and after the reform of 1676, when French Jesuit priest Dominique Bouhours said, "The masculine always takes precedence over the feminine," meaning in a French sentence, the presence of one masculine noun will automatically trump the presence of any number of feminine nouns. His justification for this was that the noblest gender—the male gender—must prevail over all other genders. To him, there was only one other gender in question: the female. Most alarmingly, he not only meant this in a grammatical sense, but in a human sense as well (Korbik 2011). Bouhours (1676) wanted to make this form, *Les*

hommes et les femmes soient beaux ‘The men and women are beautiful,’ the correct, official version of French grammar. In this sentence, *beaux* ‘beautiful’ (masc. pl.) takes a masculine form, though *belles* ‘beautiful’ (fem. pl.) exists as well. It does not matter if there are hundreds of women referred to, if but a single man is among them, *beaux* would still take precedence.

Prior to the reform of 1676, the most widely accepted syntactic rule for gender was one of linear proximity. That is, in a case where one adjective modified two coordinated nouns of different genders, the noun linearly closest to the adjective would determine its gender. Thus, the sentence, *Les hommes et les femmes soient beaux*, would have been ungrammatical before 1676 as *les femmes* is closer to the adjective, and *Les hommes et les femmes soient belles* would have been the natural construction. Beauzée’s (1767) grammar book essentially echoes Bouhours (1676). It reads, “The masculine gender is deemed more noble than the feminine gender because of the superiority of man over woman” (Beauzée 1767:102). In 2011, Henriette Zoughebie petitioned for the grammar rules to revert to those prior to 1676. She asserts “this grammar rule [reform of 1676] shapes a world of beliefs in which the male is seen as superior to the female,” and the reintroduction of the old rule, she argues, would help relieve sexist notions in current society. Many teachers have committed to overthrow this rule. In 2017, 314 teachers signed a declaration saying they would refuse to teach their students in accordance with the 1676 and 1767 rule (McCoubrey 2017). They said the rule encourages children “to accept the domination of one sex over the other” (Althouse 2016).

These reforms have consequences beyond their morphosyntactic distributions. Baudino (2001) examines the historical feminization of professional titles, especially during times of political reform in France. She finds multiple instances where French authorities used written masculine titles as a justification for denying women access to resources they needed (Baudino 2001:364). Women do not come by textual visibility easily because the professional titles they occupy have traditionally masculine forms. Indeed, some people automatically assume that anyone who holds a title is male if that title lacks a feminine form (Brick & Wilks 2002:60).

The study of women’s education itself was not widely studied until the 1980s. Linda L. Clark, a historiographer, studied scores of education books, finding only three of them concerning women (1984). Historiographer François de Salignac de la Mothe Fénelon says in *Education des filles* (1687), “Nothing is neglected more than the education of girls.” In the 17th century, women’s education focused mainly on

Catholicism as girls went to school merely to learn how to be better housewives. Sonnet (1987) researched in the *Archives Nationales* as well as congregational and parish records. She found a “dominant perception of women’s role at home and in the family” (Harrigan 1998).

Christofides (2018) finishes her discussion with the *imaginaire linguistique* ‘linguistic imagination’ proposition (Houdebine 1999:32). Christofides explains:

[Houdebine states] the need to make women in the workforce visible linguistically by eliminating discriminatory language via the feminization of professional titles. She [suggests that] research on the interaction between the sociological and the linguistic in the construction of sexual identity could be the next step in this continuously evolving field.

Houdebine conducted many surveys about the public view on feminization, and she found most people favor feminization via derivation of the male form of professional nouns, such as *conductrice* (fem.) from *conducteur* (masc.) ‘conductor.’ She claims the gap between the public view and the French Academy shows the morphological instability of the French language (Houdebine 1999). Her *imaginaire linguistique* argument helps contextualize factors affecting the feminization of profession nouns. Christofides (2018) supports the argument that the French gendered grammar and sexism go hand in hand. One of the only ways to eradicate this sexist view is to reform the language.

2 Possible Solutions

Because gendered grammar relates to the sexist dynamic of human interactions (Groult 2000), there must be a fight for equality—whether in terms of professional respect, textual visibility, or historical credit—that every gender deserves. However, there are many different views on how to solve this issue. Even within the feminist movement, there is disagreement on how to address feminization, and there is even some questions if the traditionally masculine profession nouns should take feminine forms at all (Fleischman 1997).

The first suggestion of feminization is to create feminine forms of profession nouns that, to date, do not have a feminine form (Rhodes-Robinson 2007). For example, *le Président* ‘the President’ could have the feminine form *la Présidente* if a woman is president. This specific example uses the feminization rule of French nouns where *-e* is affixed, a morphological process already used in the feminine forms of many French

adjectives. However, for words like *le professeur* ‘the professor,’ feminization of the noun is less clear. Following traditional French morphological rules on feminizing verbs with *-eur* ending, we would end up with *la professeuse* since *-euse* is a feminine form of *-eur*. However, the French Academy does not like the form *la professeuse* because they deemed it ugly-sounding (Rhodes-Robinson 2007). Feminizing *le professeur* using the *-e* suffix is also looked down upon by the French Academy because *-e* does not occur with *-eur* words in French morphology, thus rejecting *la professeure*. Yet another suggestion is the use of the word *femme* ‘female’ in front of the noun, giving us something like *une femme professeur* ‘a female professor’ (with the noun kept masculine), which leads into the next issue.

By using an entire extra modifier, *femme*, some feel this markedness inherently implies gender inequality. Such is the view among the feminists who do not want separate feminine forms of the language as they see a feminine form as an extra disparity between men and women. Adding a separate modifier for feminine forms just furthers the notion that women do not have equal access to the professions that men do. However, this does not address the lack of textual visibility and reinforces that the default for human professions is still masculine (Moscovici 1997).

Historically, feminine versions of certain nouns have existed, but they have contained different meanings than just simply the female version of a historically male profession. Leys (1987) addresses this problem, such as how *Madame la Présidente*, which selects for a feminine article *la* and features an *-e* suffix, does not in fact refer to a woman president, but rather has traditionally been used to refer to the male president’s wife. If a woman were to hold this office herself, how would people refer to her? Would they use *Madame la Présidente* and risk conflation in historical representations? Or would they use *Madame le Président*, which despite the masculine forms, at least has distinction from the historical equivalent of ‘First Lady’? (Leys 1987:20). Undertones of this same sexism permeate in adjectives as well. *Galant* ‘well-brought-up’ in its masculine form, has a positive connotation. However, when inflected with feminine *-e*, it becomes *galante*, which has historically meant ‘easy’ or ‘whoreish.’ Thus the same adjective which has a positive association for men is used disparagingly for women (Rhodes-Robinson 2007:38). While these gendered meanings may be grammatically arbitrary, the feminine forms often have negative connotations.

Many of these problems have been addressed in Francophone countries outside of France. In Québécois Canada, profession nouns have already been feminized to

accommodate for women who now hold traditionally male positions. In 1976, the Parti Québécois began their progressive practices. The Québec National Assembly asked the *Office de la langue française* (OLF) what a woman should be referred to if she assumed the position of Vice President. The linguists recommended feminization, and the OLF accepted. The OLF acknowledged that many feminized forms did not already exist due to historical and sexist reasons (Villers 2007:82). They ultimately agreed on the feminization of Québécois French profession nouns. In 1979, the OLF issued the following statement:

As for the gender of job titles, the Office de la langue française has recommended the use of feminine forms in all possible cases:

- either adopting the feminine term in common use: *couturière* (seamstress), *infirmière* (nurse), *avocate*;
- or adopting the noun of common gender preceded by a feminine determinative. Examples: *une journaliste*, *une architecte*, *une ministre*;
- or by spontaneously creating a feminine form that respects French morphology. Examples: *députée*, *chirurgienne* (surgeon), *praticienne* (medical practitioner);
- or by attaching the word *femme*. Examples: *femme-magistrat* (magistrate), *femme-chef d'entreprise* (company director), *femme-ingénieur* (engineer). (OLF 2017)

The approach for feminization was more unified among women in Québec, and this statement served as a starting point for them. Many Québécois believed that the feminization of traditionally masculine profession nouns is a reflection of the natural progression of society, which is contrary to what the French Academy promotes (Villers 2007:82). As a result, France has fallen behind in the feminization of nouns compared to its worldwide Francophone counterparts. This could be attributed to the oppressiveness of the French Academy, using its institutional power to create obstacles for language change (Larivière 2001).

Discussion

No matter the direction of the feminization movement, little consideration has been made to include nonbinary pronouns and profession nouns in the French language. There has been a movement called *écriture inclusive* ‘inclusive writing.’ This advocates a *-e.s* suffix on traditionally masculine nouns to indicate resistance to a strict gender binary (Revell,

Schuh, & Moisan 1994:15). However, this movement has been met with backlash among many Francophone people, as it quickly changes the fundamental structure and grammar of the language. No backlash, however, has been as brutal as the French Academy's — they called *écriture inclusive* a movement that is a “mortal danger” to the French language (Rhodes-Robinson 2007:40). As of March 1, 2019, the French Academy has finally allowed for the feminization of profession nouns. This new development came as a surprise to linguists and politicians alike, as the French Academy did not have a history of openness. Dominique Bona, one of the Immortals of the French Academy, said, “[The French Academy] has shown it is sensitive to the fact that women are thinking about the definition of their jobs. It will now tolerate feminisations that have long been banned” (Henley 2019).

Conclusion

There are many factors to consider when approaching the feminization of French profession nouns, and there are many historical and institutional barriers to gender inclusivity movements. The feminization of language brings textual visibility, and thus rights and resources, to women in the traditionally male professional realm. The most efficient and effective way of feminization is still under debate, and it may take some time before common ground is reached. But current movements may take inspiration from Québec to incorporate more gender-inclusiveness in language.

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©Irene Yi

University of California, Berkeley

ireneyi@berkeley.edu

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