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

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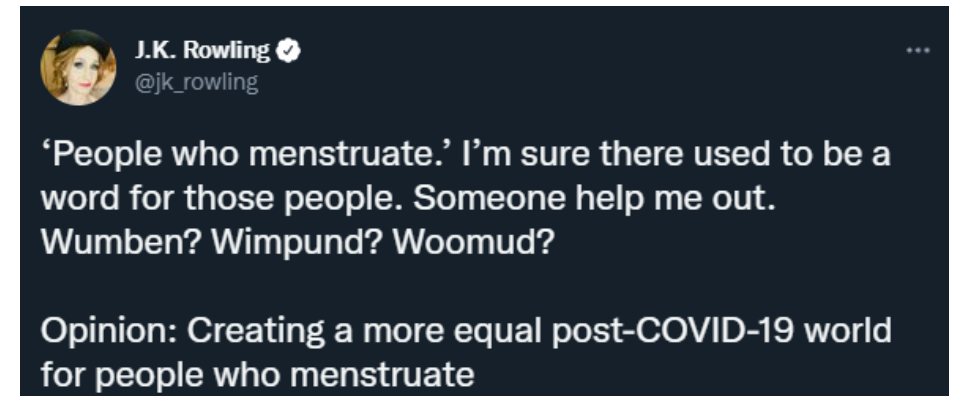
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Attitudes towards gender-inclusive language: A multinational perspective

Aims

Research questions:

- Explore **how Twitter users position themselves in relation to FLR in French and English.**
- Identify and compare **the types of discourses** that are circulated in Twitter users' rejection or acceptance of reform, and which **may (in) directly construct wider, hegemonic discourses of gender inequality.**
- Discuss what **the analysis of discourses** constructed by Twitter users reveals about the ways in which **issues of gender inequality are perceived.**



French dictionary accused of 'wokeism' over gender-inclusive pronoun

Education minister condemns use of 'iel', saying inclusive writing is not the future of the French language

Feminist language reform

FLR – working to uncover **the complex, unequal, and diverse ways in which language systems represent men and women** (Liddicoat, 2011: 1).

Proposing language strategies that **address instances of gender bias in language**, and which **raise awareness of the socially-embedded role of language** in gendering activities, people, and ideas

While certain reforms have been successful (e.g., Milles, 2011), others have and continue to be rejected (e.g., Académie française, 2021)

- Language reforms are **anything but minor for speakers** (Curzan, 2003: 180)

Intersectional Feminism & CDA

Gender is a social construct; it is **performed** (Butler, 1990)

- Gender constituted by a **multiplicity of discourses** and **diverse subject positions**

Intersectional feminism – encouraging praxis that **speaks for all women along intersecting axes** of social class, sexuality, race, etc. (hooks, 2015: 2)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) aims to understand **prevalent social issues via discourse analysis** (van Dijk, 1993: 252); discourses are **ideological carriers**

Epistemological site: Twitter

Twitter is one of the largest social media platform websites in terms of its userbase and publicly accessible online data on human interaction (Golder and Macy, 2015: 3)

Speakers organize their social lives **online as well as offline** (Blommaert, 2019: 3); these lives do not exist independently of one another

Online social media platforms **important sites for CDA** – shifts in power of historically top-down media communications from elite institutions to users themselves; important to engage with this “many to many dynamic of discursive practice” (KhosraviNik, 2017: 582)

Methodology

Tweets collected using **RTweet** package for *R* (Kearney, 2019) over 6-week period

Search terms relating to FLR (following Durham, 2016) were chosen - *‘écriture inclusive’*, *‘langue inclusive’*, *‘herstory’*, *‘gender inclusive language’*

Triangulatory approach to data analysis (Baker and Levon, 2015)

- Tweets imported and processed into NVivo 12, a qualitative data analysis software
- Computer mediated sentiment analysis and word frequency query (both in NVivo 12) to identify broad patterns
- (Traces of) discourses then manually identified and named

Combining quantitative and qualitative analytical methods helps to “overcome the limitations associated with single-method analyses and research bias” (Baker and Levon, 2015: 223)

Discourse naming & identification

Linguistic traces of discourses explored in terms of **specific nominative, predicative, perspectivisation**, and **intensification/mitigation** (discursive) strategies (Wodak and Reisigl, 2017)

Social actor construction not tied to specific linguistic categories – focussing on **the diverse ways social actors are represented** by using **a range of linguistic and rhetorical phenomena** (van Leeuwen, 1996: 34)

Interpretative discourse identification (Sunderland, 2004)

Data

13,852 total tweets collected from January to March 2022

- Resulted in final datasets of **6,871** French tweets, **6,981** English tweets

Search term	Raw Tweet count	Tweet count post-filtering
Écriture inclusive	8,167	6,440
Langue inclusive	608	431
Total	8,775	6,871

Search term	Raw Tweet count	Tweet count post-filtering
Herstory	15,327	4,076
Gender-inclusive language	7,490	2,905
Total	22,817	6,981

Quantitative results: French

Sentiment analysis:

- *Ecriture inclusive* – 28.4% positive, 71.6% negative (out of 2,849 coded references)
- *Langue inclusive* – 34.3% positive, 65.7% negative (out of 300 coded references)

Word frequency – shared dominant themes

- **Negative** evaluative attributions ('complicated', 'illegible', 'problem', 'sh*t')
- **Positive** evaluative attributions ('beautiful', 'better')
- Focus on language form ('faults', 'orthography', 'write', 'spoken', 'usage', 'agreement')
- Lexis in the semantic field of **politics, ideology** ('politics', 'ideology', 'right/left', 'wokeism', 'party')
- **Abstractions** ('culture', 'evolution', 'history', 'thought', 'world')
- **Passivating** verbs ('impose', 'massacre', 'destroy')
- Other imperatives ('stop', 'give', 'respect', 'remain', 'use')

Quantitative results: French

Shared dominant discourses across both search terms (écriture inclusive / langue inclusive)

Dominant discourses to express **rejection**:

- Reform as ‘ideological battle’ (28.3% / 14.4%)
- Reform as ‘political correctness gone mad’ (25% / 21.1%)
- Language as ‘identity’ (17.5% / 48.7%)

Dominant discourses to express **acceptance**:

- Reform as ‘necessary’ (28.5% / 32.2%)
- Rejection as ‘excessive’ (21.3% / 0%)
- Language ‘can change’ (16% / 27.1%)

Responses to accept and reject both search terms sustain and circulate very similar (contending) discursive articulations

Quantitative results: English

Sentiment analysis:

- *Herstory* – **64.2%** positive, **35.8%** negative (out of 2,184 coded references)
- *Gender-inclusive language* - **39.3%** positive, **60.7%** negative (out of 2,304 coded references)

Word frequency – **diverse themes** across both search terms

Herstory:

- Predicates of **positive attributes** ('happy', 'greats'), particularly **celebratory** ('inspiring', 'amazing')
- **Agency**, e.g., transitive verbs ('making', 'creating', 'changing')
- **Diversity** ('woman', 'dragrace', 'black')

Gender-inclusive language:

- Themes of **binary** ('inclusion/exclusion')
- Lexis in the semantic field of **bodily function** ('birthing', 'pregnant', 'menstruators')
- Focus on 'women', 'females', 'woman'

Quantitative results: English

Dominant discourses to express **rejection** to *herstory*:

- Affirmations of rejection (44.6%)
- Herstory as 'excessive' (26.6%)
- Herstory as 'incorrect' (13.6%)
- Herstory as 'virtue signalling' (6.8%)

Dominant discourses to express **acceptance** to *herstory*:

- Women as 'remarkable' (45.1%)
- Women as 'diverse' (21%)
- Women's stories matter (19.3%)
- Power femininity (10.5%)

Dominant discourses to express **rejection** to *gender-inclusive language*:

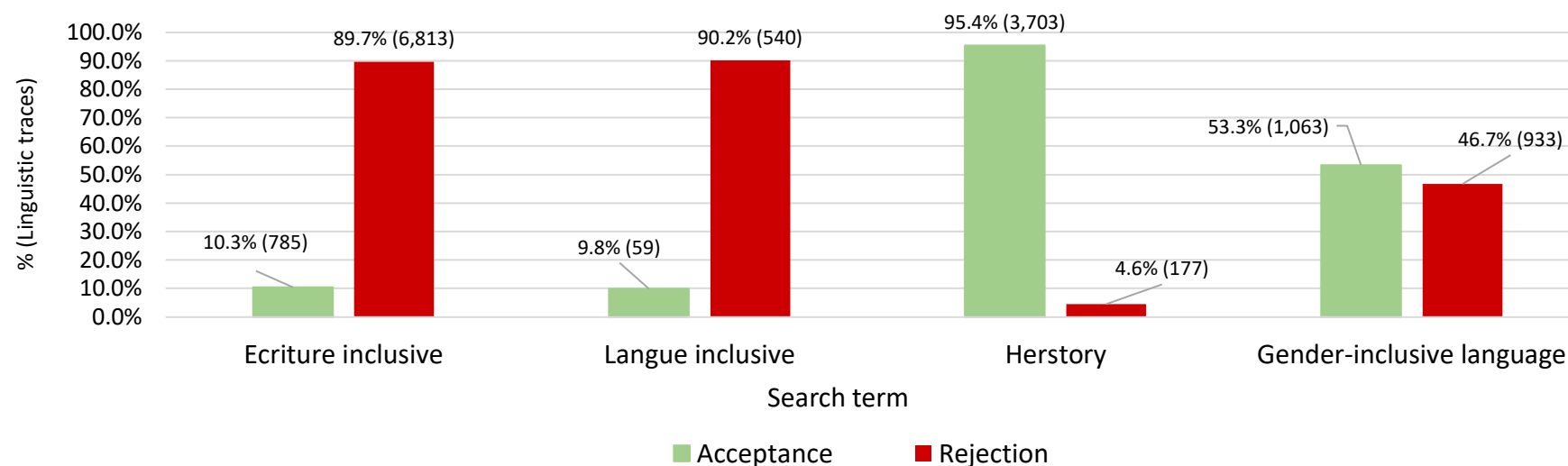
- Women as 'erased' (35.7%)
- Reform as 'PC gone mad' (21.7%)
- Gender as 'ideology' (15.5%)
- Reform as 'ideological battle' (14.1%)

Dominant discourses to express **acceptance** to *gender-inclusive language*:

- Reform as 'necessary' (35.5%)
- Women as 'visible' (22%)
- TERFs (trans-exclusive radical feminists) (15.3%)
- Reform as 'a simple ask' (14.8%)

Quantitative results: Overall

Figure 1. Distribution of linguistic traces of discourses of acceptance and rejection across all search terms.



French dataset: 7,598 total linguistic traces

- *Ecriture inclusive*: **785** acceptance, **6,813** rejection
- *Langue inclusive*: **59** acceptance, **540** rejection

English dataset: 5,876 total linguistic traces

- *Herstory*: **3,703** acceptance, **177** rejection
- *Gender-inclusive language*: **1,063** acceptance, **933** rejection

Qualitative analysis: FLR in French

Ideological battle(s): A war on ‘wokeism’

- [1] “Woke” ideology consists of **taking offense** at everything and anything, finding **absolutely everything problematic** and using inclusive writing **excessively**, but the worst thing is the **DICTATORSHIP** OF POLITICAL CORRECTNESS, it’s just unbearable, REALLY. There you have it.
- [2] Are we at that point now then? Where we **fuss** over inclusive writing? Tell us how **we, the people**, the **powerless**, the reactionaries, **are to spell the humanitarian disasters of war with your political correctness**? Beyond this condescending and uncalled-for tweet, it is disrespectful.

French language as identity: discourse(s) of endangerment

- [3] Inclusive writing is **destroying** the French language. Support **our beautiful** French language [that is being] **attacked** by **the wokes who are trying to ruin it** through “inclusive” writing.
- [4] Inclusive writing is **an insult to our language**, motivated by a **pseudo-woke** movement that **wants to call our history into question...** this inclusive writing **is like adding Coca Cola to a glass of vintage Bordeaux wine** (for **those** who understand...)

Qualitative analysis: FLR in English

Diverse women 'making herstory': discourses of empowerment

- [1] This is the best tribute to the two most **original, unforgettable, incredible** and, **you guessed it, unpredictable** women in herstory.

- [2] **Congratulations** to our amazing head coach for making Black herstory – **first African-American woman to head coach a college men's basketball team** in history! Thank you for your **contribution!**

Gender-inclusive language: sex-essentialism and the war on 'women'

- [3] Chest feeding is not gender-inclusive language. **It denies the reality of women's biology.** It erases women. **And 'people' don't get pregnant.** Women do. To deny this is **madness** and **deeply misogynistic.** Not surprising as **the drive to do this comes from AGP men.** It bolsters their **fetish.**
- [4] Genuine question. Why is this precious 'gender inclusive language' (which excludes half the world's population) **never applied to men? I have literally never seen** the words 'ejaculating people' or 'prostate people' **EVER.** This **sh*tty anti-science cult is pure misogyny.**

Comparing FLR: French and English

Similar themes of excess in rejections of *gender-inclusive language* and *écriture inclusive/langue inclusive* – perceived as **excessive attention to the sensibilities of ‘marginal’ groups**

French speakers embroiled in questions of identity, ideology, and culture **in relation to language**; themes absent from the English dataset despite evidenced circulation of such discourses within English contexts and communities (e.g., Curzan, 2014)

Final remarks

- Acceptance or rejection of FLR is always a debate about **something other than language** (Milles, 2011)
- Discourses relating to FLR contend, relate to, and co-construct each other to **sustain hierarchical gender orders**
 - Evaluating the success of any reform requires understanding gender inequality issues as a continuously evolving discursive, and thus ideological, system that can change over time (Mills, 2008)
- FLR and associated discourses have the potential to be **repurposed, reframed, and recast by speakers in overtly and covertly harmful ways**
- Process of evaluating the success of FLR should embed language practice within the (discursive) ecology of non-linguistic contexts of use

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