

**Legitimizing ‘iel’?
Language and Trans communities in Francophone and Anglophone Spaces**

Edited by Vinay Swamy (Vassar College) and Louisa Mackenzie (University of Washington, Seattle)

“Legitimizing ‘iel’?” originated in 2015, at a moment when the dramatic, very public transitioning of reality star Caitlyn Jenner captivated the [US media](#), and the [Tennessee State legislature](#) formally debated defunding universities that allowed students to pick gender-neutral pronouns. In this context of heightened trans visibility, students at Vassar College made a seemingly simple request to the Department of French and Francophone Studies: they wanted the possibility to assume French equivalents of “they,” “them” and “theirs,” the three most popular third-person singular alternatives for the conventionally gendered pronouns “s/he,” “him/her” and “his/hers.” Although faculty in the department were sympathetic to the request, the bi-gendered nature of the French language (masculine or feminine only) made it impossible to provide such a space without adopting new pronouns (such as *iel*, *yel*, *ul*, or *ille*), with all associated linguistic changes. Besides this challenge, instructors were faced with practical classroom considerations—should all students learn neo-pronouns? What would happen when students studied abroad in Francophone contexts?—and were also confronted with the question of our own authority to change French, for that language is, quite simply, our object of study. In light of recent attempts to expand the linguistic spaces available to French speakers, the department decided to organize a symposium on the subject to begin a productive dialogue to understand better the contours of this matter of great pedagogical and social importance. This special issue for H-France’s Salon records and develops further many aspects of the conversation that was facilitated at Vassar College in April 2018, bringing together Anglophone and Francophone scholars and activists from Canada, the USA, and France.

This special issue considers recent attempts to make available gender-equitable, -neutral, and -expansive linguistic spaces to French speakers, and explores the extent to which the hegemonic linguistic preference for the masculine gender, within a bi-gendered structure, has influenced the Francophone non-binary trans community’s strategies for linguistic inclusivity. As such, the essays assembled here will likely raise more questions than they answer. This is by design; the “legitimizing” in the title is both ironic and interrogative, marking a critical, if troubled, distance from the conventional implications of legitimization. In particular, we put pressure on the assumption that legitimacy can only be granted by institutions to individuals rather than being inherent to those individuals. In the readings that follow, legitimacy is not a stable state so much as a “becoming,” a contested process rather than an achieved result. In French and in English, and particularly in between the two, our authors variously trace the becoming-legitimate of

gender inclusivity beyond the binary and beyond the purview of *l'écriture inclusive*.¹ Similarly, 'iel' refers, in the first instance, to only one of the newly-minted gender-expansive pronouns that have gained currency within some French gender-nonconforming (GNC) spaces. We will return to this term below. But it is important at the outset to acknowledge that, rather than advocate for a prescriptive approach to particular additions to vocabulary, our titular evocation of this innovation is better read as a metonymy for the various creative shifts at play in language and culture, in an effort to focus on the limits of language and on the lapses, if not the potentially harmful erasures, that such limits might engender.

For some gender-nonconforming persons, an essential part of their self-identification is located outside socio-political legitimizing processes. Nevertheless, we recognize the power of social institutions and discourses to both shape individuals' sense of self-worth and to influence their material well-being. Thus, while the contributors variously advocate for broader social acceptance of GNC language, they do so with the awareness that advocating for such shifts in communication tools comes with its own risks of hierarchization.

The initial question that sparked this special issue was the possibility of non-binary gender expression in the French language; simply put, a search for ways to express a non-binary identity (neither masculine nor feminine) in a language whose bi-gendered pronouns and rules of agreement would seem to render such expressions invisible. Increasingly, English-speaking students of French are wondering how to translate the singular they (and other non-binary pronouns such as *xel*), while Francophone non-binary individuals have begun to demand visibility and to create the linguistic conditions for congruent self-expression. In response to such voices, even mainstream media outlets in France and Canada have begun to cover—especially on their online platforms established to enhance the outreach of traditional journalism—the perspective of non-binary individuals in order to shed light on the challenges they face.² In light of these organic changes afoot at various levels, be they individual, artistic or more organized forms of resistance to institutional limitations, we aim to describe and analyze a social process of identity formation and affirmation that is already taking place, and to provide our readers with a range of insights, perspectives, and resources that might be helpful in Anglophone and Francophone spaces.

¹ *L'Écriture inclusive*, or inclusive writing, is defined as “l'ensemble des attentions graphiques et syntaxiques qui permettent d'assurer une égalité de représentations des deux sexes” (Hadad 4). The key distinction between inclusive and gender-expansive writing is that the former remains tethered to binary gender and does not structurally allow for genders that are neither masculine or feminine. This and other key terms are defined in the glossary at the end of this special issue.

² For example, ARTE and Radio France Culture have produced several programs, many referred to in Louisa Mackenzie's contribution to this issue. An informative [interview with trans sociologist Karine Espineira](#) on the stakes of non-binary representation and its relation to so-called “binary” transgender issues was published in *Les Inrockuptibles* (Quentel 2018) in response to a highly-mediatised appearance of a masculine-presenting non-binary person on the [29 June 2018 edition](#) of *Arrêt sur images*, a web-based political talk show hosted by Daniel Schneidermann. Radio Canada devotes an index page—“[identité sexuelle, c'est quoi ton genre?](#)”, including a link to a short article entitled “Un français plus neutre : utopie ?” by Geneviève Proulx—to addressing basic questions regarding non-binary and trans subjects.

While queer and gender politics, broadly speaking, have received much-deserved attention in Francophone academic spaces,³ less attention has been paid to date to the effects of the linguistic limitations of a language like French on the politics of queer discourse.⁴ Unlike the Anglophone American experience,⁵ the lack of similar widespread non-binary pronouns in France can perhaps be partly attributed to the important role language plays in French Republican identity formation.⁶ Thus, the contributors in this special issue will explore the extent to which linguistic norms, in as much as they focus on hegemonic identity formations in French, have burdened the Francophone trans community's varied interests in promoting pronoun choice and inclusivity beyond the binary. Furthermore, we raise the broader question of the extent to which such linguistic tools are fundamental to legitimizing a political space for trans members within French or American society. Contributors to this Salon present their explorations of these questions using a variety of disciplinary approaches. We hope that sharing this discursive space will give us the opportunity to engage supportively with matters important to trans communities on both sides of the Atlantic, and believe that these interventions are crucial to expanding discussions beyond U.S.-based Anglophone public discourse.

Many of our readers will see parallels between these conversations and the debates around *l'écriture inclusive* (EI), which champions feminization when appropriate (*la cheffe* du département) and insists on the inclusion of terms or signs to indicate any heterogeneous, if still binary, composition of plural subjects (for example, “les étudiants et les étudiantes” or “les étudiant·e·s” for short). Non-binary language is, in some ways, an extension of the principles of EI in order to embrace, socially and linguistically, gender identities neither masculine nor feminine. Certainly, non-binary-inclusive French raises the question of how language reflects and creates social reality, just as the proponents of EI believe that grammatical preference for the masculine in a bi-gendered language has real-life consequences for female-gendered individuals

³ See, for instance, the work of French inter-university research clusters such as the [Institut du Genre](#), [Laboratoire d'études de genre et de sexualité](#), and the [Chaire de recherches sur l'homophobie](#) at the Université du Québec à Montréal.

⁴ Some exceptions include Barbara Bullock (2001), Alexandre Duchêne and Claudine Moïse (2011), Marie-Emile Lorenzi (2017), and Luca Greco (2018), as well as creative experiments by, e.g., Wittig (1973), Anne Garréta (1986), Hoquet (2011), and Barasc and Causse (2014). The work of the linguist and novelist Alpheratz, discussed by several contributors here, bridges the creative and the scholarly.

⁵ On 24 March 2017, the Associated Press announced [a style guide change](#) to include the singular “they,” “them” and “theirs” (Easton 2017).

⁶ This specificity of French history may go some way to explaining the relative belatedness of non-binary discourse in French compared to other Romance languages, particularly in comparison with the use of “[Latinx](#)” in North American educational and activist spaces, for instance. Given our readership and our own scholarship, this issue only focuses on the French language and Francophone cultures. It goes without saying, however, that we would welcome any expansion of this discussion, in a comparative or other framework, within the context of other Romance languages.

in French society. Several of our contributors here address the comparisons and contrasts between EI and non-binary-inclusive language. As advocacy for both continues, it is important to keep in mind the extraordinary socio-cultural power of the prescriptive model of linguistics in the Francophone world, and the particular status of the *Académie française*.⁷ The [Académie's initial response](#) on 26 October 2017 to “l'écriture dite ‘inclusive’” made it clear that they considered any remaking of grammatical gender in the name of social change to be a “péril mortel” for the language. Nonetheless, the institution subsequently reluctantly [voted to adopt the feminization of titles and professions](#) on 28 February 2019. With this in mind, it is clear that the struggle for extending inclusiveness beyond the binary will face even harder institutional challenges. Many of the hostile responses to the non-binary linguist Alpheratz's advocacy for [gender-inclusive grammar](#) provide a sense of the entrenched resistance such advocacy is encountering.⁸ While institutional legitimation is not necessarily the goal of all non-binary French speakers, those who would at least like to see formal recognition of a non-binary pronoun option must think tactically about how to proceed. In light of these developments, the contributors to this special issue focus on various aspects related to the political and cultural debates evoked by the prospect of linguistic recognition of gender nonconforming identities on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean in order to develop, nuance and enrich our understanding of the issues at stake.

In the first section, “Histories,” [Flora Bolter](#) presents an overview of the current situation in France and makes a case for inclusivity of both traditionally gendered groups as well as nonconforming individuals. Given the rigid linguistic framework of the French language, she considers the different strategies used by LGBTQ+ associations in France in their attempts to create a gender-equitable language. She concludes with observations on individual responses of gender nonconforming persons to the challenges posed by the French linguistic binary in order to unpack the nuances of their context-dependent approaches (professional, familial, social, or intimate) to creating an inclusive linguistic space.

In “Linguistic Uprisings,” [Luca Greco](#) considers recent linguistic interventions in light of the long-standing challenges to the hegemonic status quo of the bi-gendered French language. In returning to key texts by feminists such as Monique Wittig, ze argues for an expansive view of the current debate to understand that language has always been challenged in different ways by those who have been constrained by its rules. Greco gives us a window into the world of drag kings in Brussels, to demonstrate how their adoption of new terms and syntax is substantially similar to Wittig's own experimentation. As such, recent non-binary “linguistic uprisings” need to be historicized and understood as responding to a need that has not been recognized by dominant society.

⁷ The [Organisation internationale de la Francophonie](#), with 88 member states worldwide, generally promotes the recommendations of the *Académie française* in matters of French usage.

⁸ Several contributions to this special issue discuss Alpheratz's work and mainstream reactions to it. See, for instance, the openly hostile responses featured in a 2018 [RT France discussion](#), or the more contained academic critique by the well-known linguist Bernard Cerquiglini on [Radio France Culture](#) originally broadcast on 22 December 2017, discussed in more detail by Louisa Mackenzie in her contribution.

In the second section entitled “Pedagogies,” [Blase Provitola’s](#) contribution ““Faut-il choisir?”” provides a multiply-situated perspective on trans access and inclusion in the French classroom, as both student and instructor, in France and the US. Provitola shows the urgent need for trans and gender-expansive allyship⁹ in educational institutions and beyond, sharing specific strategies from their own pedagogical practice and the reasons behind them. Provitola reminds readers of the real-life consequences of exclusion for transgender individuals, arguing that pronouns are a vital signifier of inclusion, and that best practices around pronouns and names must be accompanied by broader commitment to trans justice.

[Florence Ashley’s](#) chapter “Les personnes non-binaires en français” methodically amplifies the purview of *écriture inclusive* to make room for a French grammar that is expansive enough to include GNC options. Allying linguistics with activism, their chapter is deliberately both descriptive and prescriptive. Ashley describes some strategies already used by non-binary French speakers and their allies, and proposes further possibilities for systematizing gender-neutral grammar, providing concrete examples in appendices. They write the chapter itself in gender-neutral French following their preferred “al-system,” providing a real-life example of principles in action. Recognizing that only time will tell which strategies will be broadly adopted, they call upon linguists to collaborate with non-binary communities in order to work towards increased visibility, and upon binary-gendered French speakers to open their linguistic practice up to non-binary frames.

In the last section entitled “Academia, Art, Activism,” [Logan O’Laughlin’s](#) chapter “Unsettling Language” thinks through the implications of the bodily imagery used to describe language. If language is a body which can be scarred, what about those real bodies that language interpolates? Intercalating academic and personal registers, O’Laughlin challenges the boundary between the two and shows the many ways in which “gendered language has material embodied effects,” in this case on a non-binary individual navigating public and private spaces in several languages. The pronoun debate is always-already both material and semiotic, and O’Laughlin reminds readers of the effects and affects of pronouns on the situated lives of those centrally concerned.

[Louisa Mackenzie’s](#) essay invites the reader to go beyond another binary habit of thinking about gender, the French-American binary. Communities hostile to GNC advocacy in France often label such discourse as an “American” (from the USA) ideology, a move which implicitly denies the existence and agency of Francophone trans people. Mackenzie argues for the strategic and ethical need to challenge this association between “America” (as a French construct) and GNC activism, and instead to amplify the activities and discourses of Francophone GNC communities themselves. Mackenzie is particularly interested in the potential of French popular media and online communities to advocate for and represent gender nonconformity outside institutionally-sanctioned spaces.

Closing out this special issue with an essay titled “*Assignée garçon*,” [Vinay Swamy](#) brings the perspective of a U.S.-based instructor of French to explore how France and French-speaking

⁹ This neologism is increasingly used and theorized in activist circles as a way to rethink the word “ally” so as to insist on the process and the ongoing work of being an ally, and not to conceive of the term as just a static noun/identity (See, for example, the Anti-Oppression Network’s [definition of the term](#)).

North Americans have responded to the call for inclusivity. He makes a case for comprehending the invention of non-binary neo-pronouns (such as “iel”) as part—if not an extension—of the *l’écriture inclusive* movement. Such reframing is evident (and necessary), Swamy argues, when one takes into consideration the creative work of the Quebecois trans activist and Webcomic artist, Sophie Labelle. By analyzing such works alongside the French state responses to *l’écriture inclusive*, Swamy reflects on the responses of both institutional and non-state actors, and lays out the potential stakes at play in this linguistic and cultural debate.

In offering H-France readers these reflections, we expand on the fruitful exchange first initiated at Vassar College in April 2018 and invite dialogue with a broader public. In so doing, we hope that the questions we raise collectively will be taken in the spirit of open inquiry. We are grateful to H-France for providing us an online forum with the attendant flexible format that includes possibilities for hypertexts, illustrations and other means of reading and analysis not possible with traditional publications. This is particularly useful given the dynamic and multimedial nature of current conversations around gender and the French language. Since the *Salon* is easily and freely accessible to the general public, this forum also allows our intervention to be a “public-facing” work while intervening in more traditional academic terms. To help readers define terms with which they might be unfamiliar, we have included a glossary at the end of this special issue. Finally, we hope that the subjects explored in these essays, and the references they provide, will contribute to the building of pedagogical resources that many of our colleagues have sought regarding matters trans in the Francophone classroom.

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