

Inclusive Language: A Cross-Lingual Comparison of the Choice between Gender-Explicitation and Gender-Neutralization Strategies

Ellen Decoo

Westminster University
1840 South 1300 East, Salt Lake City, UT 84105, U.S.A.
Salt Lake Community College
4600 S Redwood Road, Salt Lake City, UT 84123, USA

Abstract

To reduce or avoid gender bias in language, two main strategies are being used: (1) gender explicitation attempts to make any gender-related identity visible as a token of recognition; (2) gender neutralization eschews any reference to gender as a veiled affirmation of unconditional equity. Both strategies aim at inclusiveness. A comparison of the ways both approaches are implemented in four languages—Dutch, English, French, and German—reveals how the unique gendered profile of each language is favoring the one or the other approach, each with its own advantages and drawbacks. This cross-lingual comparison extends to other questions, taking into account the gendered profile of each language: To what extent do the various strategies succeed in the intended recognition of gender-diverse identities? How do lingual changes affect broader sociocultural polarizations within each language realm?

Keywords: inclusive language, gender identity, gender-neutral language, gendered pronouns

1. Introduction

Language plays a decisive role in the projection and perception of identities. Over the centuries, androcentric language is said to have contributed to stereotyping women in subordinate social roles and to reinforcing an overall disregard of women (Bodine, 1975; Coates, 2015; Pusch, 1984; Viennot, 2014). First-wave feminism, in its demands for voting rights, turned to the very language of legislation which had defined the generic *he* as equally applicable to *she* (Baron, 2020; Scott, 1988; Thébaud, 2017). Starting in the 1960s, second-wave feminism developed an even greater interest in the interplay between language and gender. Demands included more inclusion of women in texts, elimination of sexism, and equal lingual treatment in many areas (Elshtain, 1982; Gearhart, 1979; Lakoff, 1973; Pusch, 1985; Spender, 1980; Wittig, 1980). For the next decades, in many countries, feminist movements generated discussions and initiatives on how to implement these demands. The rationale was to acknowledge the existence of two distinctive groups, men and women, but equal. In the 1990s, third-wave feminism required greater attention to individuality. Judith Butler's landmark books (1990, 1993) disrupted clear demarcations of sex and gender. Butler's views became foundational to queer theory, challenging the heteronormative binary system and blurring the lines between other groups. It gave voice to those who could not identify themselves in the traditional male-female binary. Gender-neutral or gender-free language became fashionable: if all cannot be named, none should. At the same time the activist movement for gender visibility in language experienced the limits of its efforts, among which the challenge to also include transgender, intersex or nonbinary individuals. In spite of all these efforts, a steady gender bias in texts remains acute as the ongoing analysis of textbooks in education demonstrates in many parts of the world. But encouraging results should also be noted, as work by Bataineh (2017) shows.

It is against this background that this article focusses on the choice between gender-explicit and gender-neutral solutions to reduce or avoid gender bias in language. In section 2, I describe the main gender-specific characteristics of four languages—Dutch, English, French, and German—to clarify their “gendered profile.” Section 3 compares for each language the predominant strategies used to ensure inclusive language, differentiating them into gender-explicitation strategies and gender-neutralization strategies. In the discussion in section 4, I first assess how linguistic features as such determine the easiness or the intricacy in producing inclusive language, before broadening to questions related to the sociolinguistic impact on recognition as well as wider sociocultural implications.

2. The gendered profile of each language

Gendered profile refers to the ratio of gendered lexical and grammatical forms that a language uses. A brief preliminary on concepts, terms, and conventions for this article is in order here. The lexical dimension pertains to the availability of separate nouns for males and females (*boy-girl, father-mother*) and of epicenes to cover both (*baby, teen, teenager, parent*). For grammar, I follow a traditional repartition in nouns, articles, and pronouns. Adjectives refer to qualitative adjectives such as *big* and *small*.

Nonqualitative adjectives are referred to as determiners: possessive (*my, your, his ...*), demonstrative (*this, that ...*), interrogative (*which, whose ...*) and indefinite (*each, other, all ...*). All of these determiners have pronoun equivalents, such as *mine* for *me*.

Female pertains to persons in the binary with *male*. *Feminine* pertains to grammar forms in the binary with *masculine*. Feminine words are identified with (f), masculine with (m). *Lingual* pertains to the language itself (lingual habits, lingual competence), *linguistic* to the study of language (linguistic research, linguistic analysis). Sometimes these words overlap or can be used in a dual sense. Examples are preceded by D., E., F., and G. to identify the language—Dutch, English, French, and German. To ensure better comprehension for non-English examples, I have chosen, as far as possible, transparent words, such as the translations for *student, professor, artist, actor*. Concerning the concept of gender profile as the ratio of gendered grammatical forms, these can be observed in articles such as G. *der, die, das*; in qualitative adjectives such as F. *grand, grande*; in possessive, demonstrative, interrogative, and indefinite determiners such as E. *his, her*, G. *dieser, diese, dieses*, F. *quel, quelle*; and in pronouns such as D. *hij, zij, hem, haar*. A language with many lexical and grammatical gendered forms is “high gendered,” one with few is “low gendered,” with variations on a scale from “not gendered” to “very high gendered.”

The following subsections briefly introduce each of the four languages as to their background, status, monitored condition, and gendered profile related to persons, with the caveat that these are simplified explanations.

2.1 Dutch: low-gendered profile

Nederlands (= Dutch) is the official language of the Netherlands and the Flemish Community in Belgium (which is also called *Flanders*), with respectively 17.5 million and 6.7 million inhabitants. It is a Germanic language, the name *Dutch*, still used in English, being a remnant of the ancient difference made between Higher Dutch, prevailing in Germany (G. *Deutsch*) and Lower Dutch spoken in the “Low Countries” (= Nether-lands). Religious wars in the sixteenth century resulted in the separation of the North, now *Nederland* (“the Netherlands” as a singular noun) and the South, now *Flanders*, part of Belgium. Though the same Dutch is officially common to both entities, on the discursive level terms proper to one country and regional differences in pronunciation quite easily reveal the provenance of a speaker. Two supranational institutions, the “Raad voor de Nederlandse Taal en Letteren” (= Council for Dutch Language and Literature) and the “Nederlandse Taalunie” (= Dutch Language Union) monitor the common lexical and grammatical core. The *Van Dale* dictionary is authoritative for officializing new words.

Dutch uses three genders, masculine, feminine, and neuter. For the lexicon, person-related nouns are differentiated by two words (*vader-moeder; zoon-dochter*) or through various morphological endings: *acteur, baron, leider, student, vriend ...*(m) versus *actrice, barones, leidster, studente, vriendin ...* (f). For grammar, the masculine and feminine articles are identical (definite *de* for both singular and plural; indefinite singular *een*; no indefinite plural). The singular definite neuter article is *het*. Third person singular subject pronouns differ (*hij, zij, het*). Like in English, only third person singular possessive determiners and pronouns have gendered forms (*zijn, haar, de zijne, de hare*). Adjectives have a limited inflection with the ending -e (*modern-moderne*), but not standard related to gender. Also like in English, there are no syntactic agreements based on gender. Overall, Dutch has a grammatically low-gendered profile, but the acquisition of its gender nuances is difficult (Blom et al., 2008).

2.2. English: very low-gendered profile

English is recognized as the most widely used language in the world. Grammar-wise it is a Germanic language, mostly resulting from various old-Germanic sources. About half of its lexicon, on the other hand, can be traced to Latin roots, often through medieval French regiolects, resulting in words such as *joy, spirit, people, table ...* Even if universal, English is quite varied as to pronunciation and lexical choices around the world. It is not monitored by any official institution, but national legislative bodies can impose norms for official texts, for example for inclusive language. Media organizations usually set norms for “proper” English. Publishers adhere to certain styles. To visualize the changing nature of English, *The Oxford English Dictionary* is the principal source. *Merriam-Webster* is often referred to for current, active vocabulary and for the officializing of new words. Like in Dutch, lexical binary-gender differentiation occurs in English through different (often etymologically related) words (*king-queen, nephew-niece*) or through suffixation with -ess (*baron-baroness, duke-duchess, prince-princess*), extending to common words such as *actor-actress, host-hostess, waiter-waitress*. A former feminine suffixation with -rix (*autrix, cantrix*) has faded. The generic masculine (*friend, teacher, officer ...*) is supposed to represent female persons too. For grammar as well, gender marking is extremely reduced, limited to the singular subject pronouns *he, she, and it* and to the related third person possessive determiners *his, her, and its*. Articles (*the, a, an*) do not differ between masculine and feminine.

Other determiners (*my, our, this, that, these, which, some, other ...*) and all adjectives (*poor, rich*) have no gendered forms. There are no further syntactic agreements between feminine nouns and any other part of the sentence. English, therefore, has a very low-gendered profile.

2.3 French: very high-gendered profile

French, like Italian, Portuguese, and Spanish, evolved from Latin alterations and regiolects over a period of many centuries. It is the official language of France and one of the official languages in many (partially) francophone countries or regions. During the Renaissance and seventeenth century, French became strictly formalized. The “Académie française,” founded in 1635, all-male until 1985, became the deciding authority in lingual matters. Its regulatory function has been supplanted by a governmental institution, the “Délégation générale à la langue française,” with similar counterparts in Belgium and in Québec. For acceptance of new words, the dictionary *Le (Petit) Robert* is considered one of the most authoritative, next to *Larousse*.

French reduced the three-gendered Latin masculine, feminine, and neuter to masculine and feminine. For the lexicon, overall it kept the Latin gender repartition, with most neuter nouns becoming masculine. Besides the masculine-feminine pairs with different words (*père-mère, frère-sœur ...*), French uses end morphemes such as *-e, -euse, -esse, -rice* for female counterparts (*marchande, danseuse, doctoresse, ambassadrice...*). French even became prolific in creating dozens of new ones during the First World War when women replaced men in traditionally male professions, as Dawes (2003) documented. For grammar, when the Latin gender marker of the declension faded, vulgar Latin adopted the gendered definite and indefinite demonstratives (*ille, illa, illum*) for specification, which in turn evolved into the French definite articles *le* and *la*. The numeral *unus, una, unum* led to the indefinite *un, une*. Gendered forms, moreover, extend to adjectives with disparate feminine formation (*curieux-curieuse, beau-belle, sportif-sportive, vieux-vieille ...*), to determiners (*mon-ma, ce-cette, quel-quelle, aucun-aucune ...*) and to pronouns (*mien-mienne, celui-celle, lequel-laquelle, tout-toute ...*). The system of gender agreement between nouns, adjectives, determiners, and pronouns makes French pervasively gendered, with various complex rules, also affecting verbal forms with participles. Hence, a very high-gendered profile. Beaumont (2023) speaks of the “hypergrammaticalization” of gender in French.

2.4 German: high-gendered profile

German is considered the “core” Germanic language. Over the centuries it developed through many fractured regiolects until the publication of Luther's Bible in 1534 contributed to standardization, first as written language. Besides present standard German, Austrian and Swiss German are the main accepted variants. Official international monitoring is in the hands of the “Rat für deutsche Rechtschreibung” (= Council for German Orthography). For decades, *Duden* used to be the normative dictionary recommended for education, but the present tendency is to be less normative, respect variations, and let usage decide. For academic and historical references, the *Digitales Wörterbuch der deutschen Sprache* (DWDS) is the prime choice.

For the lexicon, like in Dutch, English, and French, binary differentiation works with different words (*Vater-Mutter, Bruder-Schwester ...*). However, in contrast to Dutch and French, German nearly only uses the suffix *-in* to feminize masculine nouns (*Baronin, Studentin, Tänzerin ...*). Grammar-wise, German uses three genders, masculine, feminine, and neuter, reflected in the definite articles *der, die, das* and the indefinite *ein, eine, ein*. One complication arises from declension, where the accusative, genitive, and dative cases affect the gendered articles, adjectives and determiners. In contrast to French, the feminine formation of adjectives is quite regular. Gender does not affect verbal forms. In short, German has a high-gendered profile, but less than French.

The cross-lingual comparison reveals how wide the range can be from very low to very high-gendered profiles. How this affects strategies for inclusive language is the topic of the next section.

3. Strategies for inclusive language in each language

In its broadest meaning, inclusive language is multidimensional and intersectional, not only pertaining to gender, race, and ethnicity, but encompassing any condition, physical, intellectual, or social, where people experience some form of exclusion when it comes to language. In that sense, inclusion is doubly defined: all should feel included, none should feel excluded. When it comes to gender, both perspectives can be achieved by two main means: (1) gender explicitation attempts to make any gender-related identity visible as a token of recognition; (2) gender neutralization eschews any reference to a particular gender as a veiled affirmation of absolute equity. In this section I present various strategies for each approach. For each strategy, I assess its language-specific implications. The topic has produced a voluminous literature of which I only refer to some samples.

3.1 Gender-explicitation strategies

3.1.1 Full binarization

Binarization is intended to always mention both men and women in language pertaining to both: D. *studenten en studentinnen*, E. *hosts and hostesses*, F. *Françaises, Français!*, G. *Damen und Herren*. In more compact writing, it can be represented with a slash: F. *locuteur/locutrice*, D. *lezers/lezeressen*. Second-wave feminism gave a strong impulse towards this development. It grew out of a refutation of the “generic masculine” which was considered unrepresentative for both men and women. The movement for binarization aimed in particular at professional identifiers. Any word indicative of an occupation had to mention its availability to both genders.

However, the morphological nature of each language determines the capability toward binarization. French has an array of feminine end morphemes with which to binarize if the feminine counterpart does not yet exist: *professeur* > *professeure*, *chercheur* > *chercheuse*, *docteur* > *doctoresse*, *aviateur* > *aviatrice*, *conseiller* > *conseillère*. Dutch also can easily feminize with the suffixes *-e*, *-es*, *-in* and *-ster* (*student* > *studente*; *eigenaar* > *eigenares*; *waard* > *waardin*; *werker* > *werkster*), next to the French endings for many Dutch loanwords such as *ambassadrice*, *coiffeuse* or *mâîtresse*. German has basically only the vested suffix *-in*, but it is widely used and easily implementable for expansion (Scott, 2006). English has the suffixes *-ess* and *-ette* also originating from French (*baroness*, *brunette*) but the number of such cases is limited. Novelties such as *teacheress* or *graduette* did not catch on, probably because nouns such as *teacher*, *graduate*, *pilot*, *reader*, *student*, *traveler* ... are, overall, already sensed as epicenes (Mignot, 2019). English inclusive language prefers pluralization and the use of gender-neutral pronouns (see 3.2.2).

3.1.2 Shortened binarization

To avoid lengthy pair forms such as G. *Lehrer und Lehrerinnen* or F. *étudiants et étudiantes*, attention turned to shortened forms that combined both words. For a long time, parenthesis had been a usual technique: D. *student(in)*, E. *steward(ess)*, F. *étudiant(e)*, G. *Lehrer(in)*. However, it came to be scorned as putting the feminine in an ancillary position. The slash tried to remedy this impediment: D. *vriend/in*; G. *arbeiter/in*; F. *employé/e*. In France, the median point, an ancient typographic device, was reintroduced to display the binary, including the singular and plural: F. *ingénieur-e-s*. German experimented with the capital “Binnen-I”: *LehrerInnen*. These graphic techniques remain unsatisfactory because quite often the letter combinations do not represent a fluent, visual choice between masculine and feminine: D. *leider/ster* for *leider* and *leidster*; F. *coiffeur/euse* for *coiffeur* and *coiffeuse*. Inclusion of the plural complexifies even more: F. *cop-ain-ine-s* for *copain(s)* and *copine(s)*. Moreover, the proposals, applied to nouns in sentences, also require similar changes in gendered articles, adjectives, determiners and pronouns. Finally, the growing sensitivity for other expressions of gender or nongender criticized the implied only-binary representations of these various systems.

In English, shortened binarization is almost inexistent, due to the limited number of gendered pairs with the same stem and the perceived binarity of epicene nouns. It also explains the absence of English for the next point.

3.1.3 Typographic representation to include the nonbinary

For some, the use of the French median point and the German “Binnen-I” already represented a token of nonbinary representation, but others felt the need for a specific marking that would signal the inclusion of all—transgender, agender, intersex, genderfluid ... In German, the asterisk or “little gender star” (“Gendersternchen”) was introduced for that purpose or was interpreted that way later on. On a basic level the system is easy in German. The gender-star inclusion only requires to write the masculine singular, add the asterisk and continue with the female ending, either in singular or plural: *Lehrer*in*, *Lehrer*innen*, the latter implying the masculine plural. A similar technique is the underscore, representing a “gender gap” on behalf of those who feel “in between” the binary representation: *Lehrer_innen*. Yet another is the use of the colon (*Bürger:innen*).

The shortened binarization and the addition of typographic signs led to vivid controversies in the francophone and germanophone realms (see 4.3).

3.2 Gender-neutralization strategies

Gender-neutral language is also referred to as gender-free, degendered, or nonbinary, each term with its own nuances and interpretations.

3.2.1 Hypernymization and epicenization

A hypernym is a word of a more general semantic level, which represents words of a lower, more specific level. Gendered words from a lower level can thus be overarched by a higher-level word which is not genderspecific: *father* and *mother* by *parent*, *boy* and *girl* by *child*, *spokesman* and *spokeswoman* by *spokesperson*, *policeman* and

policewomen by *police officer*. These higher-level words should therefore be epicenes, words that are considered equally applicable to males and females, and, in the eye of the beholder, also to nonbinary identities. Still, the etymological origin of such epicenes is gendered, and may still be sensed that way, also pending one's own personal connotation attached to such words. For many people, *spokesperson* or *officer* may primarily evoke a male person, while *teacher* is sensed as female, with *she* as pronoun.

Which languages are most amenable to this approach? Inasmuch as such hypernyms or epicenes are available, the strategy to use them for gender neutralization works easily in Dutch and English. Indeed, articles, adjectives and determiners accompanying such a noun do not specify gender: E. *one legal parent should be present* = D. *een wettelijke ouder moet aanwezig zijn*. Both sentences apply equally to any gender. Only the use of a subsequent singular pronoun (D. *hij, zij*; E. *he, she*) would point to gender. In French, however, the same sentence cannot avoid masculine markers: F. *un parent légal doit être présent*. German knows similar obstacles to gender-free rewording with epicene hypernyms. Users should thus be willing to accept that such words, whatever their explicit grammatical gender (F. *le parent, le membre, la personne ...* ; G. *der Elternteil, das Mitglied, die Person...*) represent any individual.

Languages can also resort to conceptual collectives for hypernymization: D. *de leiding* for *leiders en leidsters*, G. *die Delegation* for *der Delegierte und die Delegierte*. French directives recommend this approach: *la clientèle* for *les client(e)s*; *le personnel* for *les employé(e)s*; *l'électorat* for *les électeurs et les électrices* (Parlement européen, 2018).

3.2.2 Pluralization

To avoid gender bias, English can easily turn to pluralization as it allows to circumvent the issue of the third pronoun singular: *An officer shall carry out his duty. He acts ...* becomes *Officers shall carry out their duties. They act ...* This principle reinforced the use of *they* even for singular persons, gaining wide acceptance as a “safe” way to refer to persons (Bradley, 2020). Also in Dutch and German, pluralization is a common strategy. However, many plural nouns, even with an epicene connotation, reflect their masculine origin: D. *studenten* is the plural of *student* (m), not of the feminine *studente* (f), which in the plural is *studentes*. German is even more explicit: *Studenten* (m) versus *Studentinnen* (f). On the other hand, like in English, masculine and feminine plural articles are identical (D. *de mannen, de vrouwen*; G. *die Männer, die Frauen*), as well as plural pronouns in their respective syntactic functions: D. *zij, ze, hun, hen*; G. *sie, ihnen, ihrer*. These gender-neutral articles and pronouns facilitate the acceptance of plural masculine words as epicenes.

In French, pluralization is well established as a language-inclusive strategy. It works satisfactorily for uncomplicated announcements and directives: *Les passagers pour le vol ... Les bénéficiaires doivent remplir le formulaire ...* But in more detailed contexts, French struggles not only with the subject plural pronouns (*ils, elles*), but also with the agreements with adjectives and certain verbal forms. The acceptance of *ils*, masculine adjectives, and masculine verbal agreements as “generic masculine” with epicenic value, as is usually done, reinforces again the “masculinization” of language, against which the feminists precisely revolted: *Les étudiants étrangers sont ... Ils ...* In complex discourse, pluralization remains deficient for high-gendered languages.

3.2.3 Nominalization from participles

This technique is linguistically possible in any of the languages, but its deliberate use for more inclusive language seems limited to Dutch and especially German. The aim is to circumvent binary words such as D. *werker, werkster; inwoner, inwonster* or G. *Lehrer, Lehrerin; Student, Studentin*, and replace them by an epicene plural derived from the participle form of a verb: D. from the verbs *werken, inwonen* > *de werkenden, de inwonenden* or G. from the verbs *lehren, studieren* > *die Lehrenden, die Studierenden*. Cases are rather rare in Dutch, but for German it is one of the open-class techniques recommended for inclusive language by the European Parliament, with examples as *die Beschäftigten, die Auszubildenden, die Mitarbeitenden* (Europäisches Parlament, 2018).

French is familiar with this formation through many existing, common nouns derived from present participles, such *assistant, étudiant, participant, passant ...* They are, however, unusable as gender-neutral words as these have feminine counterparts. In English, nouns for persons based on participles are attested in phrases such as *the living and the dying, the fallen in the war, the ailing and the bereaved*, but there is no need to expand this technique. English has plenty of nouns derived from verbs that are, overall, considered epicenes such as *assistants, players, travelers, workers*. A related phenomenon, however, is the use of an adjectival present participle combined with an epicene noun, which may be felt as more gender neutral, such as *working people* instead of *workers*.

3.2.4. Neologization and degenderization

If gender-neutral words are missing, why not create them? The feminist movement has been doing this in the opposite direction, by creating feminine counterparts to masculine-only nouns. That effort is still ongoing as new professional titles appear. The reverse movement is just as active. A gender-neutral neologism should be representative for both binary and nonbinary individuals, but in practice insists on the nonbinary. In that sense it could be considered a form of gender explicitation, raising consciousness for ignored groups, but its compactness cannot exteriorize all the diversity it intends to display.

For nouns, this search for neologisms centers on hypernyms that combine a traditional binary pair. Queer communities suggest plenty of alternatives. For example, for *brother* and *sister* (for which English has *sibling*), the German *Brüder* and *Schwester* can be replaced by *Geschwister* or *Bruderin*; the French *frère* and *sœur* by *frœur*. For *uncle* and *aunt*, G. *Tante* or *Onkel* is a *Tonke*, F. *oncle* or *tante* is a *toncle*. Gendered forms of adjectives and determiners are equally mixed to create neutral counterparts. For example, for French, the adjective *nouveau-nouvelle* (m/f) becomes *nouvelleanouveau*, the possessives *mon, ton, son* (m) and *ma, ta, sa* (f) become *man, tan, san*. English has seen the emergence of *nibling* or *niephling* for *niece* and *nephew*; *auncle* or *phibling* for *uncle* and *aunt*. These developments are still fluid as they come from various corners of the anglophone world. Full acceptance is achieved when such neologisms are added to authoritative dictionaries.

But the most active search for a gender-neutral neologism concerns the third person pronoun, which in each of our four languages is binary in the singular (D. *hij, zij*; E. *he, she*; F. *il, elle*; and G. *er, sie*) and in French also in the plural (F. *ils, elles*). No matter how well the previously discussed strategies for nominal gender neutralization work, subsequent pronouns are inescapable in fluent discourse. In fact, the search for a pronominal hypernym to represent *he* and *she* has been ongoing for centuries, to represent epicene antecedents understood as valid for men and women. Baron (1981) lists the numerous suggestions made over the years, among which *ha, hesh, hizer, ne, na, ze*. Neologisms are not easy to disseminate if the existing alternatives are so deeply ingrained, as is the case with pronouns. Still, in English the extant gender-free plural pronoun *they* has made significant inroads for singular antecedents, to the extent that Krauthamer (2020) sees it as “the great pronoun shift.” Though *they* is not a neologism, its different value acts as novel.

French has seen an equally intensive search, with many proposals not catching on. Since a few years, the neologism *iel* (plural *iels*) is advancing, as a combination of *il* and *elle*. It obtained strong support by its inclusion as “official” word in *Le Robert*. The German situation seems uncertain, but the neologisms *sier* and *xier* find adherence in queer communities. Becoming accepted is the neologism *frau* as alternative to the neutral third person subject pronoun *man*, as in “Man sagt ...” (equivalent to E. *One says ...*, F. *On dit ...*, D. *Man zagt ...*). Because of its resemblance to *Mann*, and thus seen as a token of male dominance, *frau* has become fashionable in some milieus. Dutch is seeking solutions in existing gender-neutral pronouns, such as *die, hen, hun* (Code Diversiteit & Inclusie, 2020).

Any proposal must also take into account the impact on other third-person possessive, demonstrative, and interrogative determiners and pronouns. English makes this easy as it uses the existing gender-neutral plurals (with as possible semi-neologism *themselves*). The process is more complicated for German and French, each determined by its gendered profile, as Schnitzer (2021) has documented.

4. Discussion

Several questions emerge from the preceding analysis of the gendered profile of each language and the various strategies for inclusive language. First, on a strictly linguistic level, to what extent is the nature of a language by itself conducive to more explicit or implicit inclusivity? Second, the perspective becomes sociolinguistic: from the viewpoint of people concerned about inclusion, how do they interpret and experience their recognition in the various strategies, taking into account the gendered profile of their language? Third, still broadening the outlook, and considering some national controversies that erupted over inclusive language in some countries, how to explain that even simple proposals for lingual changes can stir such sociocultural polarization?

4.1 Linguistic perspective: the effect of language gendered profiles

The comparison of our four languages shows an equation: the more elaborate a language in terms of gendered structure and grammar, the more welcoming it is to implement binarization as a gender-explicitation strategy. Dutch and French have an array of suffixes to feminize nouns, while German can do as much with the suffix *-in*. As long as also the gendered articles, adjectives, determiners, and pronouns are allowed to be freely used, these three languages can maximalize the expression of male and female inclusion. On the other hand, French and German struggle with gender-neutralization strategies because of their boundness to masculine and feminine syntactic agreements. For Dutch, gender neutralization is somewhat easier to achieve as agreements are less explicit.

But all three languages face typographic hurdles when it comes to a more compact explicitation of the masculine and feminine. Parentheses, slashes, and intersecting combinations of binary terms become obstacles to fluent reading and are impractical for oral expression. Even more challenging and confusing are the attempts to insert typographic signs in order to include nonbinaries. Even nonbinary neologisms remain grammatically gendered. It explains the extensive controversies that have dominated the francophone and germanophone realms (see 4.3).

In English, on the other hand, its very low-gendered profile cannot easily differentiate between masculine and feminine nouns to make both visible. However, its many nouns sensed as epicenes help to make English gender neutral on a semantic level, and quite unhindered by syntactic agreements. The use of *they* as singular pronoun is gaining increased acceptance. At the same time, this gender neutrality is still based on implicit binarization and does not make nonbinaries visible. Neologisms such as *nibling* and *auncle* remedy this lack, but their use remains within limited circles.

In short, the gendered profile of each language is pivotal for the easiness or intricacy in producing gender-explicit or gender-neutral language.

4.2 Sociolinguistic perspective: the impact on recognitions

Inclusive language aims at inclusion, either by trying to mention all, or by mentioning none. The latter technique proceeds from the assumption that when there is no gender marking at all, none should feel excluded. However, not feeling excluded may not mean the same as feeling included. In that sense, describing a gender-neutral approach as “inclusive” can be considered ambiguous. How do the various strategies for inclusive language play out pragmatically in this difficult balance for recognition, considering how each language foremost handles them?

The gender-explicitation strategy is basically binary: put the female next to the male. In feminist thinking, this requisite was a reaction against the perception of androcentrism in texts. For English, Baron (2020) documented the controversies that for centuries raged around the use of *he* in legal documents pertaining to inheritance, professions, voting, and more, as a way to exclude women. Baron posits that the generic *he* was seldom truly neutral. Viennot (2014) argues the same for French. For feminism, it seemed therefore evident that reducing the generic *he* by augmenting *she* would also reduce inherent sexism. As described above, the linguistic features of each language determine the ease or the challenges associated with these developments. French and German proved the most fertile for this binary development but it made them the most contentious compared to Dutch and English (see 4.3).

However, critical feminists also question aspects of this binary gender explicitation. One concern is that language is being sexualized and the difference between men and women unduly accentuated, as if they are essential homogenous categories (Leiss, 1994; Speer, 2005). Related is the concern that women place themselves on the margins of humanity, precisely by deflating the generic masculine, which is valid for all (Michard, 1996). The more the generic masculine is eschewed, the more it loses its neutral status. For German, Trutkowski and Weiss (2023) demonstrate through synchronic and diachronic data that German masculine nouns commonly display a non-male generic interpretation. Therefore, one should consider to what extent the perception of the generic masculine is influenced by the respective lexicon and the gendered profile of each language. For example, in English, *man* is the ultimate generic antecedent for *he*, as in “man is mortal.” The word represents *mankind*, but still with *man* as headword, though *humankind* is available too. Similarly in French with *homme*, in “l’homme est mortel.” Here the collective is *l’humanité*, the world of *les humains*. *Human* comes from the Latin *homo*, understood as generic for each human being. Dutch and German, on the other hand, have a hypernym for “man and woman,” D. *mens* and G. *Mensch*, with D. *mensheid* en G. *Menschtum* as collectives. The step to accepting the generic *he* becomes much smaller.

Yet another concern: inclusive language that encourages the use of the masculine-feminine binary in order to explicitly include women may be sensed as accentuating the exclusion of the nonbinary. The typographical signs that French and German introduced are intended to remedy that deficiency, but they still require the voluntary acceptance of such values because, in essence, the binary representation is still the basis of the construct. Conversely, the question can be asked: are alternatives, such as the English singular pronoun *they*, the French *iel* or the German *sier*, intended as all-encompassing pronouns or only as referents for nonbinary identities? If the latter, cisgenders referred to by such an alternative pronoun may feel pushed towards a political language they do not want to be associated with.

An opposite concern is that gender neutralization is leading to a renewed occultation of women in texts. Feminist voices insist therefore on still needed female identifications in legal texts affecting women’s rights, certainly in countries where such rights are suppressed (Kaufman & Lindquist, 2018; Saguy et al., 2020). Inasmuch as English and French are officially used in some of these countries, the gendered profile of French may give more leeway to focus on women’s distinctiveness than English.

4.3 Sociocultural perspective: the impact on cultural polarizations

Attempts at changing the language can spark strong public reactions. Historically, the demands for more inclusive language have at first come from feminist voices in the wake of much larger demands for civil, educational, and professional equality. As the more radical feminist voices tied their argumentation to a denunciation of male privilege, even innocuous demands for feminine forms for professional identifiers were perceived as threatening the societal order, prompting rejection and ridicule.

The cross-lingual comparison made in this article thus triggers the question whether the gendered profile of each language is a significant factor or not for cultural and political polarization. A survey of the related literature seems to confirm that French and German, with their respective high-gendered profiles, have been much more prone to this polarization than Dutch and English, identified as languages with a low-gendered profile.

To take French as example, a major lingual controversy in the 1970s and '80s dealt with the feminization of names for occupations. It was quickly politicized as it was promoted by leftist parties and resisted by conservative forces, among which the authoritative Académie française. The lingual demands intertwined with the sociopolitical as analyzed by, among others, Dawes (2003), Houdebine-Gravaud (2003), and Paveau (2002). It is interesting to note that the feminization of names was more readily accepted in the more liberal francophone periphery—Québec, Switzerland, and Belgium. These plurilingual countries, independent from France's normative straitjacket, showed more flexibility to adaptation.

Likewise, discussions in France over more inclusive language for gays and lesbians promptly turned political. For example, in 2013 the proposal to use the epicene hypernym *parent*, instead of the binary *père-mère*, in a revision of the *Code civil*, was central to inflaming the national controversy over same-sex marriage and adoption, pitting progressive against conservative France. Next followed the discussions over the complexities of shortened binarization (3.1.2) and typographic proposals to also include nonbinary individuals (3.1.3). When in 2017 a textbook for elementary school used some of these novelties, another national controversy erupted, finally leading the government to prohibit such new graphic systems for educational texts. Since then, the controversy over these signs spilled over in the battles around “la culture woke.” Nowadays, as part of electoral promises, right-wing political parties vow to forbid “l'écriture inclusive” (Erdocia, 2022).

In the German realm, quite similar developments have swayed public opinion and fed severe polarization. Like for French, the gendered nature of German hampers easy solutions. Any proposal leads to passionate polemics, driven by inflammatory rhetoric on social media. Analysis of these language-driven battles can be found in, among others, Baumann and Meinunger (2017), Gautherot and Schneider-Mizony (2023), and Henninger (2021). Of course, language as such is not the basis for a political progressive-conservative contrast that has existed for centuries. But it functions well as a fire accelerator. The more gendered the profile of a language, the more conspicuous proposals for change. Unusual word formations and neologisms disturb vested lingual habits. They provide an easy attention-grabbing title in the media and open floodgates for polarized debate. For the past decades, German and French have been standing out in these storms.

In the Netherlands, a country famous for its liberal outlook, feminist activism achieved early breakthroughs on social issues. In those developments, inclusive language for women was never a major issue on account of Dutch's low-gendered language profile. However, as the Netherlands became more racially diverse over the past decades, another form of language activism for inclusion emerged in the early 2000s: abolish and replace words and idioms felt as colonial or derogative to minority groups, including those with physical or mental limitations. Some feel now that this corrective movement has become too invasive and exacting over the years—“What are we still allowed to say?”—triggering a woke/anti-woke polarization with language at its core (Decock & Van Hoof, 2022). A similar development can also be observed in Flanders (Beheydt, 2023).

Countries in the anglophone realm have gone through their own developments for equal rights for women, but have not experienced the French and German decades-long turbulence over binary lingual choices. Also here, the reason must be found in the very low-gendered profile of English. For referents to nonbinary individuals, solutions are proposed within the extant language, though implementation can be thorny (Cordoba, 2022; Zimman, 2017). However, like in the Netherlands, in anglophone countries polarization has been mounting over nonbinary and culture-inclusive language when people, intentionally or not, use or fail to use inclusive language. This is particularly the case in the United States. Incidents related to racist, sexist, or transphobic speech are widely publicized and become fire accelerators for the culture wars.

As a multilingual entity, the European Union has been getting its share in controversies over inclusive language. When in October 2021 Equality commissioner Helena Dalli unveiled a document for more gender-neutral language that also effaced Christian identifiers, the conservative response was sharp. In the same vein, international organizations such as Oxfam that promote nonbinary and culture-inclusive language get embroiled in conflicts with local populations. Whistle blowing over alleged lingual offenses, in any direction, has become widespread.

5. Conclusion

The comparison of four languages shows how different lexically and grammatically gendered profiles lead to different treatments of inclusive language. A high-gendered profile, typical for French and German, makes gender-explicitation strategies easier by the use of unambiguous binaries. However, the creation of new feminine forms and the attempts to compacted writing for both binaries and nonbinaries have led to fierce national controversies.

On the other hand, a low-gendered language profile, as found in Dutch and English, facilitates gender-neutral inclusive language. The inclusion of nonbinaries is feasible, pending willingness to accept extant third person plural pronouns and determiners. However, no solution, either through explicitation or neutralization, can satisfy all groups, as matters are exacerbated by heightened attention to appropriate speech. Changes will continue to occur, providing also endless opportunities for future research on multiple fronts.

According to Alhumaid, “only significant social and economic changes can modify the language usage in a particular location” (2017, p. 127). In centuries past, indeed, a slow and natural process of habituation made such modifications accepted with time. Nowadays, however, new factors such as the instant power of influencers on social media, the speed of electronic text, the lively lingo’s among younger generations, or the viral shaming of alleged offenders can alter sensitive language at much greater speed, often fanning wider cultural polarizations. In that kind of dynamics inclusiveness remains elusive.

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