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## The inclusive language debate in France

Ann Coady

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# The inclusive language debate in France

How is it that the inclusion of a three-letter word in the online dictionary *Le Robert*<sup>1</sup> could cause so much uproar in France? In November 2021 *Le Robert* updated its online dictionary, adding a variety of new words. However, it was the pronoun *iel* that caught people's attention. A three-letter word, that, according to some, is a pernicious attempt by the woke movement to destroy the French language, along with the nation's values.



The pronoun *iel* (in the singular and *iels* in the plural) is a relatively recent pronoun that can be used to refer to a non-binary person or to someone whose gender is unknown, similar to singular and plural *they* in English. *iel(s)* is an amalgam of the masculine pronoun *il* (he) / *ils* (they) and the feminine pronoun *elle* (she) / *elles* (they): *i+el(s)*. It has, in fact, been around for at least 10 years and was already referenced on the [French version of online dictionary Wiktionary](#) long before *Le Robert* decided to include it. However, it seems as if a certain line has been crossed now that it's in the well-respected *Le Robert*.

If the inclusion of *iel* in *Le Robert* caused such a furore, the use of the interpunct (*point médian* in French) seems to have pushed some completely over the edge. The interpunct can be used as an alternative to doubling the noun, for instance *étudiant·e·s* (students) instead of *étudiants*<sub>MASC PL</sub> *et étudiantes*<sub>FEM PL</sub> and for the agreement of adjectives and past participles, for example *les étudiant·e·s sont arrivé·e·s en retard* (the students arrived late) instead of the masculine "generic" — *les étudiants*<sub>MASC PL</sub> *sont arrivés*<sub>MASC PL</sub> *en retard*. Again, the use of the interpunct has been around for quite some time, but recently has been gradually gaining ground outside of feminist or non-binary circles. The rising popularity of the interpunct is seen by some as the tentacles of wokeism working their way deeper and deeper into society — wokeism is rarely, if ever, defined by those who use the term as an insult, and remains an elusive catch all for anything to do with gender, the feminist or LGBTQIA+ movements.

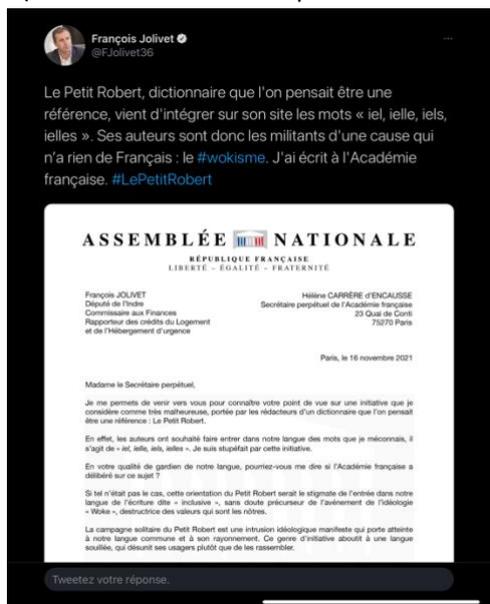
If linguists have been fairly measured in their reactions, certain politicians have been anything but. The fact that the media polemic is dominated by politicians, rather than linguists, is in itself revelatory. Despite claims from the political right that vocal minorities are instrumentalising the language in a struggle that has nothing French about it, opponents are doing some instrumentalising of their own.

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<sup>1</sup> *Le Robert* is one of the best-selling dictionaries in France. The first edition was published in 1967, and was part of the general progressive movement of the time, which included the uprisings of May 1968. It was [celebrated by some \(and criticised by others\) as being a left wing dictionary](#), in that it used modern writers for its examples, and included non-standard and regional forms, compared to the more normative dictionary *Larousse*. *iel* is not included in the *Larousse* dictionary.

COADY, Ann (2016) "The inclusive language debate in France", *IGALA blog*:  
<https://www.genderandlanguage.com/single-post/the-inclusive-language-debate-in-france>

(Tweet from elected representative François Jolivet)



Rather than *iel* and the interpunct being a public conversation led by linguists, it has been hijacked by the political right in France, who have transformed it into a kind of political straw man used to decry anything seen as vaguely left wing. Over the past 18 months, no fewer than three bills have been proposed in the French parliament to make the use of inclusive language *illegal* by anyone receiving state funds (including 5.6 million state employees — or a fifth of the entire workforce — as well as any groups or associations that receive public funds). [The last bill](#) was so vaguely worded that it would have made not only the interpunct illegal, but also the most banal formulas such as *Françaises*, *Français* (Frenchwomen, Frenchmen), used in almost every presidential address to the nation since Charles de Gaulle. One can only assume that the fact that the bill was so badly worded was because the authors never even entertained the idea that it would actually pass, and that the real objective was to simply attract the media spotlight. Had it passed, however, as an employee of the French state, I would have run the risk of a 5000€ fine for using *iel*, the interpunct, or even just beginning an email with *Chères<sub>FEM</sub> étudiantes<sub>FEM</sub>, chers<sub>MASC</sub> étudiants<sub>MASC</sub>* (Dear students). The paradox of *imposing* a certain norm (standard French) and *censoring* another norm (inclusive language), while at the same time railing against the “tyranny of a vocal minority” seems to have entirely escaped the attention of some particularly vocal politicians.

Whereas discussions in the 1980s and 1990s (Houdebine 1989) focused on using a feminine noun to refer to a woman, for instance *Madame<sub>FEM</sub> la<sub>FEM</sub> présidente<sub>FEM</sub>* instead of *Madame<sub>FEM</sub> le<sub>MASC</sub> président<sub>MASC</sub>* (Madam president), debates over the last 10 years have focused on the crux of the problem of gender representation in French — the “generic” masculine. Previous disputes left the generic function of the masculine intact (to refer to a mixed group, the masculine retained its status as norm). However, the current controversy centres on this so-called generic “value”, seeing it as a *function* rather than an innate property. In other words, the generic masculine is simply a convention that has sedimented over the centuries (Motschenbacher 2010). This is what I believe makes this current debate so much more interesting than those concerning the feminisation of job titles that dominated the public arena until the 2010s, as this one strikes right at the heart of the issue — the supremacy of the masculine and the binarity of linguistic and social gender.

## References

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<https://www.genderandlanguage.com/single-post/the-inclusive-language-debate-in-france>

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