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Mademoiselle: crinoline and swings, promises and spring roses?

A few years ago a student of mine was complaining about a grade I had given him, and in the course of the conversation he referred to me as *Mademoiselle* [Miss], which immediately made me wince. I live in France, where teachers at all levels are addressed as *Madame* [Mrs/Ms] or *Monsieur* [Mr] (but never *Mademoiselle*). As well as being linked to marital status, *Madame* and *Mademoiselle* also depend on a woman's age and hierarchical status in the exchange come into question. Therefore, I understood the student's use of *Mademoiselle* as a challenge to my authority (that he saw me as young and incompetent), and sent him packing with the original grade I had given him. Later on that day I went to a café where the waiter smiled and said, "Merci, Mademoiselle" as I handed him payment for my coffee. I smiled back and sat down to drink my coffee congratulating myself on getting a *Mademoiselle* in my mid-30s, when I suddenly realised what a bad feminist I was. That morning, *Mademoiselle* had been an insult from my student, but a few hours later I was flattered.

A campaign had been launched a couple of years earlier by two French feminist groups in an effort to erase *Mademoiselle* from official forms (Chiennes de garde and Osez le féminisme 2011). The anti-*Mademoiselle* camp criticised it as sexist, and intrusive (Darrieussecq 2012). The pro- camp bemoaned the "murder" of *Mademoiselle* by feminists "because *Mademoiselle* is playfulness, youth, insouciance, crinoline and swings, promises and spring roses, flowery dresses [...]. *Madame* is the apartment, the country house, coats, jewellery, repayments, lovers, Madame is tedium, it is quitting" (Morel 2012). Hmm...

France has been notoriously slow when it comes to adopting feminist linguistic reforms (Fleischman 1997; Dawes 2003). *Mademoiselle* is still widely used in France, whereas in Quebec it is only used for very young girlsⁱ, and has not appeared on official forms since 1976. Switzerland removed it from official forms in 1973, East Germany removed the equivalent, *Fräulein*, in 1951, Austria in 1970, and West Germany in 1972 (Elmiger 2008, 321). Half a century later, the French government followed suit, and decided to remove *Mademoiselle* from official government forms. However, this decision did not go uncontested, and in a study I carried out on the frequency of use of *Mademoiselle* from 2010 to 2014 in two French newspapers, I found evidence of a backlash in one of the papers (Coady 2014). In fact, 13% of occurrences of *Mademoiselle* referred to female politicians in an effort to discredit them, to highlight their incompetence or unsuitability for a position of power. *Mademoiselle* may be "playfulness, youth, insouciance, crinoline and swings", which is fine if you like that sort of thing, but it is hard to be taken seriously sitting on a swing in a flowery crinoline dress, with spring roses in your hair.

Mademoiselle should be seen in the context of other non-sexist language initiatives, which include the use of feminine job titles to refer to womenⁱⁱ, and campaigns to reintroduce the rule of proximityⁱⁱⁱ. All of these initiatives have met with much more resistance in mainland France than other francophone countries. Having lived in France for 15 years, I don't think it is any more sexist than the UK or other francophone countries I have visited. It seems that the

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French have a different relationship with their language. Fleischman points to the 'depth of reverence felt in much of French society toward the standard language [...] that has maintained the French language in a virtual straitjacket in France' (Fleischman 1997, 840–1). The top-down nature of language policy in France, and the influence of the Académie française (but see Viennot et al. 2016 for a scathing attack on them) has tended to limit initiatives which don't come from the top. Things are changing, but nowhere near as fast as in other Francophone and Anglophone countries.

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ⁱ Office Québécois de la langue française: http://bdl.oqlf.gouv.qc.ca/bdl/gabarit_bdl.asp?id=3634

ⁱⁱ See the 2014 incident of a male parliamentarian who insisted on using the masculine *président* to refer to his female colleague, despite her repeated requests to use the feminine, and the media debate that ensued: <http://www.french-news-online.com/wordpress/?p=38409#axzz4KPVH86J2>

ⁱⁱⁱ <http://www.cafebabel.co.uk/society/article/sexist-grammar-the-french-and-german-cases.html>