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Ann COADY

## The gender-inclusive language debate in France: A battle to save the soul of the nation?

### 1. Introduction

Debates about gender-inclusive language have reached fever point in France with warnings of the fall of the Republic, the infiltration of “woke ideology” into the education system, and attempts by elected representatives to legally ban and punish the use of gender-inclusive language.

However, these debates are nothing new, and if we take historian Karen Offen's (2000) metaphor of feminism as a volcano, they can be seen as just that — the most recent eruption of feminism, and more widely, gender-inclusive politics. It is important not to lose sight of the historical lineage that this current debate is part of. Quarrels about gender inclusivity and the French language have been going on since at least the French Revolution. In 1789 the National Constituent Assembly published *La Déclaration des droits de l'homme<sub>MASC</sub> et du citoyen<sub>MASC</sub>* ‘The Declaration of the Rights of Man and the Citizen’, with *homme* ‘man’ and *citoyen* ‘citizen’ in the masculine singular. Contrary to the expectations of the women who were involved in the uprising, the declaration did not include them, and was interpreted in the masculine not the generic. In response, Olympe de Gouges' published *La Déclaration des droits de la femme<sub>FEM</sub> et de la citoyenne<sub>FEM</sub>* ‘The Declaration of Woman and the Female Citizen’ two years later in 1791 (see Bosvieux-Onyekwelu 2020 for more details). The crux of the problem here was whether the masculine was being used as a generic, in an inclusive sense to refer to all humans or in an exclusive sense to refer only to men — some assumed that it was, and some argued that it was not<sup>1</sup>. The use of the masculine in a generic sense remains one of the two fundamental issues at stake today.

Like most other Indo-European languages, French has grammatical gender, which is present not only in nouns, but also in satellite elements such as determiners, adjectives and past participles. In current standard French<sup>2</sup> the masculine

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<sup>1</sup> Recent studies in cognitive linguistics show that the masculine is understood, first and foremost, in its exclusive sense, rather than in an inclusive, generic sense (e.g., Gyga, Zufferey & Gabriel 2021).

<sup>2</sup> By “current standard French”, I am referring to the variety of French that is taught in schools today and promoted by conservative language institutions such as the *Académie française*.

can be used in an inclusive sense to refer to mixed sexed groups. For instance, in the sentence *Tous<sub>MASC</sub> les participants<sub>MASC</sub> sont arrivés<sub>MASC</sub>* ('All the participants have arrived'), the participants are referred to in the masculine plural, which is being used in a generic sense to refer to all the participants, whatever their gender. Even in sentences where women outnumber men, the presence of one man will mean that all the satellite elements will be in the masculine, for instance *Un homme et 500 femmes sont venus<sub>MASC</sub> à la conférence* ('One man and 500 women came to the conference'). The past participle of the verb is in the masculine (*venus*) not in the feminine (*venues*), even though women vastly outnumber men in this example. This rule is known as *le masculin l'emporte* or 'the masculine takes precedence' and is at the centre of current debates.

The second major point of contention in recent debates is the binary nature of French. It is almost impossible to talk about a person in standard French without being obliged to reveal their gender. All nouns are either grammatically masculine or feminine, there are no neuter nouns. Thus, in a sentence like *I had dinner with my neighbour*, the speaker has no choice but to reveal the neighbour's gender: *J'ai dîné avec mon<sub>MASC</sub> voisin<sub>MASC</sub>* if the neighbour is a man, or *J'ai dîné avec ma<sub>FEM</sub> voisine<sub>FEM</sub>* if the neighbour is a woman. This constraint presents an obvious problem for non-binary people, or in cases where the speaker does not wish to reveal someone's gender.

The structure of French, like other languages with grammatical gender, undeniably presents more obstacles to gender-inclusive language, compared to languages like English. Nonetheless, other francophone countries such as Quebec and Switzerland have adopted gender-inclusive language more than France (Elmiger & Tunger 2014; Tibblin 2019), which begs the question as to why there is more resistance in France if we are dealing with the same language. This observation therefore implies that the language structure is only part of the resistance, and that there are other, underlying issues at stake.

This paper sets out to identify those underlying issues, and how the inclusive-language debate is unfolding in France. Many scholars have pointed out that, "pronouncements about language belong to a 'double discourse' in which language is simultaneously both itself and a symbolic substitute for something else" (Cameron 2003: 448–449), and that "concerns about 'proper' language are ultimately refractions of a deeper need or desire to impose order on other social issues" (Milani 2010: 127). The perspective that is taken on gender-inclusive language is determined to a great extent by the way that it is represented to the public. Therefore, identifying how the issue is represented in the media, the kinds of discourses used, the kinds of language ideologies these discourses are based on, and the other political ideologies that are intertwined with these language ideologies, will help us to better understand why speakers accept or resist gender-inclusive language in France, and

how debates in France correlate to debates in other languages. In this paper, I focus on metaphors that are used to argue against gender-inclusive language, for reasons of space, but also because I feel that it is important to understand resistance to socially progressive movements and the persuasive function of certain metaphors in this debate.

## 2. Conceptual framework: language ideologies and critical metaphor analysis

### 2.1 Language ideologies

Language ideologies are cultural conceptions about language — its nature, purpose, speakers, and discursive practices. However, these conceptions are not simply individual attitudes towards language, but culturally shared ideologies that form part of larger cultural and social systems, and that are loaded with moral and political interests (Irvine 1989: 255). The field of Language Ideology (henceforth referred to as LI<sup>3</sup>) aims at identifying both explicit and implicit metalinguistic discourse (Woolard 1998: 9), i.e., how we talk about language, with the objective of denaturalising taken-for-granted explanations and meanings of and about language. In this way, LI seeks to explore the complex cultural and social ideological matrix in which language intersects with other social identities such as gender and sexuality (Milani 2010: 121), and how this ideological matrix is created and maintained.

Not only do language ideologies *express* culturally shared conceptualisations about language, they also *shape* them. Language ideologies have been described as “interpretative filters” (Mertz 1989: 109), or as “central mediating forces through which language is made meaningful in culturally specific ways” (Rosa & Burdick 2016: 108). In the context of gender-inclusive language, changing ideologies of gender equality in society, in combination with the language ideology of LANGUAGE IS A TOOL<sup>4</sup>, are currently reshaping the structure of French with, for example, the new gender-neutral third person pronoun *iel*<sup>5</sup>, which *Le Robert* dictionary added to its online dictionary in 2021, provoking a media firestorm.

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<sup>3</sup> In this paper, the field of Language Ideology is referred to as LI, as opposed to individual language ideologies, which are referred to in full.

<sup>4</sup> Conceptual metaphors are conventionally written in small capitals.

<sup>5</sup> *iel* in the singular and *iels* in the plural are neologisms created by LGBTQ+ groups around 2010 as gender-inclusive alternatives to the third person pronouns *il* ‘he’ and *elle* ‘she’ in the singular and *ils* ‘they’ and *elles* ‘they’ in the plural.

In this paper, I am interested in what kind of language ideologies underlie the discourses drawn upon in the current French debate, and their place in the wider cultural and social ideological matrix that they are part of.

## 2.2 Critical Metaphor Analysis

In their landmark book, *Metaphors we live by*, Lakoff & Johnson (1980) argue that it is virtually impossible to talk about the abstract world without using metaphors. As language is an abstract system, it is therefore not surprising that the language ideologies that I identified in this study are expressed as metaphors.

I adopt Charteris-Black's Critical Metaphor Analysis (CMA) approach, which integrates corpus linguistics with cognitive linguistics and Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA), and in which metaphor is understood as "a way of thinking and a way of persuading as much as it is a linguistic phenomenon" (Charteris-Black 2004: 22). This approach is particularly relevant for analysing social issues as the perspective taken on issues like gender-inclusive language are largely determined by how they are metaphorically represented to the public and is therefore "a potent and potentially powerful weapon." (Charteris-Black 2004: 23).

Charteris-Black argues that there are three criteria that define metaphors: linguistic, cognitive and pragmatic. From a linguistic perspective, a metaphor is a word or phrase that causes semantic tension. One example of this would be personification — referring to an inanimate thing as an animate being, for example referring to language as though it were a person — see part 4.2. From a cognitive perspective, there is a psychological association between a source domain and a target domain — the entity from the target domain is thought of as similar in some ways to an entity from the source domain, for example if a language is conceptualised as a person, it can be harmed, attacked or disfigured — see part 4.2). However, it is the pragmatic perspective that makes this approach critical. According to CMA metaphors are a "fundamentally persuasive discourse act" (Charteris-Black 2004: 13). A metaphor is used to express evaluation in an *indirect* manner and "frequently conceals an underlying persuasive function that is often not immediately transparent" (Charteris-Black 2004: 9). For instance, if language is being disfigured, the underlying message is that it should be protected from this harm. It is precisely this indirect, hidden aspect of language, that is used to persuade, manipulate, and control, that both CMA and CDA seek to expose. CMA provides the framework and tools to reveal the intentions of speakers through identifying the metaphors they use and the ideologies that underlie them.

### 3 Methodology

The conceptual frameworks of LI and CMA led rather naturally to the choice of corpus linguistics as a methodology. LI and CMA aim to make visible language ideologies and metaphors that are often opaque, and corpus linguistics provides a robust methodology and tool to do just that. The analysis of corpora can reveal patterns in language that would not necessarily be noticed otherwise.

Charteris-Black uses a three-step methodology (Charteris-Black 2004: 34–35) that is based on Fairclough's (1995: 6) three stages of identification, interpretation, and explanation in CDA:

- Metaphor identification: deciding whether there are metaphors present in a text and which ones.
- Metaphor interpretation: establishing the cognitive and pragmatic factors at play in the metaphors identified, including identifying conceptual metaphors and conceptual keys.
- Metaphor explanation: explaining how the metaphors are interrelated, how they make sense in the context in which they are used, and their ideological motivation.

The corpus linguistics part of my study corresponds to the first stage of metaphor identification. The results and discussion section will include the interpretation and explanation of the metaphors identified through corpus linguistics.

I used Factiva to compile a corpus of newspaper articles from the French press dating from the beginning of 2000 to the end of 2022 with the following search terms:

*écriture inclusive* 'inclusive writing', *féminisation de la langue* 'feminisation of language', *féminisation du langage* 'feminisation of language', *féminisation du lexique* 'feminisation of the lexicon', *féminisation de la grammaire* 'feminisation of grammar', *féminiser la langue*, 'feminise language', *féminiser le langage* 'feminise language', *féminiser le lexique* 'feminise the lexicon', *féminiser la grammaire* 'feminise grammar', *grammaire non sexiste* 'non-sexist grammar', *grammaire sexiste* 'sexist grammar', *iel* 'they', *iels* 'they', *langage non sexiste* 'non-sexist language', *langage sexiste* 'sexist language', *le masculin l'emporte* 'the masculine takes precedence', *mademoiselle la case en trop*<sup>6</sup> 'Miss, one box too many', *mademoiselle sexiste*

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<sup>6</sup> *Mademoiselle, la case en trop* refers to an online campaign launched in 2011 to eliminate the option *mademoiselle* 'Miss' from government forms.

‘mademoiselle sexist’, *monsieur la députée*<sup>7</sup> ‘Mr female representative’, *point médian*<sup>8</sup> ‘middot’, *pronom neutre* ‘neutral pronoun’, *règle de proximité*<sup>9</sup> ‘the rule of proximity’, *sexisme langagier* ‘linguistic sexism’, *sexisme linguistique* ‘linguistic sexism’, *que les hommes et les femmes soient belles*<sup>10</sup> ‘let men and women be beautiful’

Occurrences that were not about gender and language were eliminated from the corpus, for example several occurrences of *iel* referred to a company of the same name, and several occurrences of *point médian* were used in a financial or geographical sense rather than to refer to the middot (see footnote n°8).

After elimination of invalid articles, a corpus of 2044 articles (1 444 884 words) was compiled. Several basic calculations were carried out such as the quantity of articles published per year over the whole period. Figure 1 shows how media attention to the gender-inclusive language debate has dramatically increased since 2016.

The corpus was then uploaded onto the online corpus linguistic tool, SketchEngine and a search for keywords was carried out. Keywords are words that appear more frequently in the focus corpus (here my French corpus) than expected when compared to a reference corpus<sup>11</sup>, and can provide an entry point into the corpus, indicating possible directions to take. After exploring the corpus through keywords and their collocations, I was able to identify several candidate metaphors.

<sup>7</sup> *Monsieur*<sub>MASC</sub> *la*<sub>FEM</sub> *députée*<sub>FEM</sub> refers to a 2014 quarrel in the lower chamber of elected representatives over the use of the masculine to refer to a female president, *Madame*<sub>FEM</sub> *le*<sub>MASC</sub> *président*<sub>MASC</sub>, instead of the feminine, *Madame*<sub>FEM</sub> *la*<sub>FEM</sub> *présidente*<sub>FEM</sub> ‘Madam President’.

<sup>8</sup> The *point médian* ‘middot’ is a punctuation mark that has, in fact, existed for centuries (it was used to separate words in ancient Latin script), but has been used more recently (the first reference in my corpus dates from 2017) in gender-inclusive language, e.g., *chaque citoyen-ne*<sub>MASC/FEM</sub> ‘every citizen’ instead of the generic masculine *chaque citoyen*<sub>MASC</sub>.

<sup>9</sup> *Règle de proximité* refers to the alternative grammatical rule of agreement whereby in a clause with nouns of both genders, the adjectives or other satellite element agree with the closest noun, rather than the masculine (e.g., *que les hommes*<sub>MASC</sub> *et les femmes*<sub>FEM</sub> *soient belles*<sub>FEM</sub> ‘let men and women be beautiful’, where the adjective *belles* ‘beautiful’ agrees with *femmes* ‘women’ rather than *hommes* ‘men’).

<sup>10</sup> *Que les hommes et les femmes soient belles* refers to a 2011 online campaign to promote the use of the rule of proximity (see previous footnote).

<sup>11</sup> A reference corpus is a bigger corpus that is used to compare relative frequency and to identify keywords in the focus corpus. For this project, I used *Timestamped JSI web corpus 2014-2021 French*, which is currently a 7-billion-word corpus made up of daily-updated news articles.

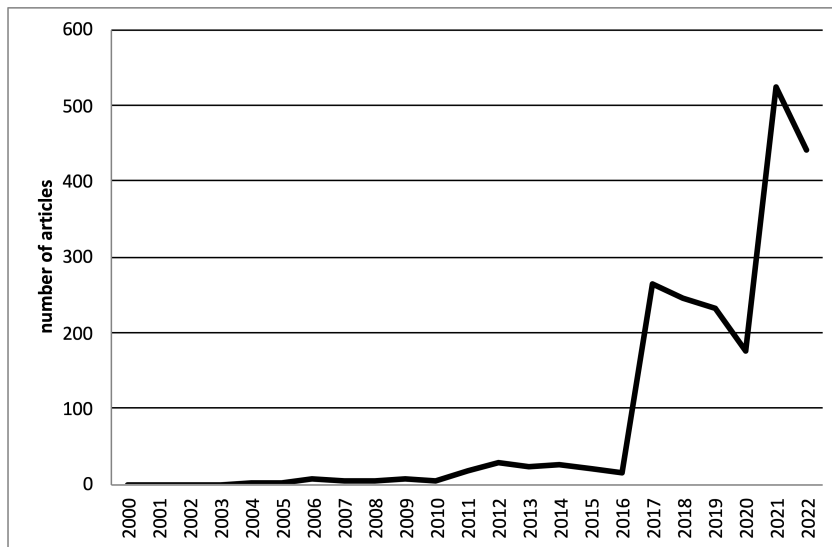


Figure 1: Articles mentioning gender-inclusive language published from 2000 to 2022

Following Charteris-Black (2004), I examined my candidate metaphors to see if they fit the necessary criteria for the definition of a metaphor:

#### Linguistic criteria

A metaphor is a word or phrase that causes semantic tension by:

1. Reification — referring to something that is abstract using a word or phrase that in other contexts refers to something that is concrete.
2. Personification — referring to something that is inanimate using a word or phrase that in other contexts refers to something that is animate.
3. Depersonification — referring to something that is animate using a word or phrase that in other contexts refers to something that is inanimate.

#### Pragmatic criteria

A metaphor is an incongruous linguistic representation that has the underlying purpose of influencing opinions and judgements by persuasion; this purpose is often covert and reflects speaker intentions within particular contexts of use.

#### Cognitive criteria

A metaphor is caused by (and may cause) a shift in the conceptual system. The basis for the conceptual shift is the relevance of, or psychological association between, the attributes of the referent of a linguistic expression in its original source context and those of the referent in its novel target context. This relevance or association is usually based on some previously unperceived similarity between the referents in those contexts. (Charteris-Black 2004: 21)



To give a concrete example, in line 1 from concordance Table 1 (*le vocabulaire et la grammaire sont des armes pour combattre « les stéréotypes de sexe »* ‘vocabulary and grammar are weapons to fight “stereotypes based on sex”’), language (an abstract entity) is described as a weapon (a concrete entity). This is an example of reification (linguistic criteria n°1). It also fits the pragmatic criteria in that its underlying purpose is to persuade the reader to support non-sexist language. In addition, it fits the cognitive criteria in that language (the target domain) is described as a weapon (the source domain). There is a conceptual mapping of one domain onto another (TARGET DOMAIN IS SOURCE DOMAIN). Language is clearly not a literal weapon, like a knife or a gun, but it is conceptualised as sharing some of the same attributes (in this case, its capacity to inflict harm), thus causing a psychological association between them.

Although I identified many different metaphors in my corpus (see Coady 2018 for more details), in this article I will focus on just three metaphors and one metonym: THE GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE DEBATE IS A BATTLE, LANGUAGE IS A PERSON, LANGUAGE FOR NATION, and THE FRENCH LANGUAGE IS A WOMAN. These metaphors (and metonym) are linked by the idea that language represents the nation, showing the role that the gender-inclusive language debate plays in the wider cultural and social ideological matrix that it is part of.

## 4 Results and discussion

### 4.1 THE GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE DEBATE IS A BATTLE

One of the most frequent metaphors is THE GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE DEBATE IS A BATTLE metaphor, which permeates my corpus. The corpus revealed numerous lemmas<sup>12</sup> clustered in this semantic field, such as:

*abuser* ‘abuse’, *arme* ‘weapon’, *atrocité* ‘atrocité’, *attaquer* ‘attack’, *bagarre* ‘fight’, *barbare* ‘barbaric’, *bataille* ‘battle’, *campagne* ‘campaign’, *combat* ‘combat’, *défendre* ‘defend’, *défaite* ‘defeat’, *défigurer* ‘defigure’, *détruire* ‘destroy’, *écraser* ‘quash’, *guerre* ‘war’, *lutter* ‘fight’, *militaire* ‘military’, *protéger* ‘protect’, *querelle* ‘quarrel’, *sodomiser* ‘sodomise’, *vainqueur* ‘victor’, *victoire* ‘victory’, and *violence* ‘violence’.

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<sup>12</sup> A lemma is the canonical, or dictionary form of a word, and includes all related forms. For instance, the lemma COMBAT includes forms such as *combattre* ‘to combat’, *combattu* ‘combated’, *combattant* ‘combatant’, etc.

Concordance table 1: Some examples of the metaphor THE GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE DEBATE IS A BATTLE

1	HCEfh), le vocabulaire et la grammaire sont des	<b>armes</b>	pour combattre « les stéréotypes de sexe » .
2	qui sont censées être la cible de cette	<b>attaque</b>	. Dans cette bataille contre les inégalités de
3	fois à la Belle Époque) ou déclenche une	<b>bagarre</b>	générale dans l'hémicycle (communistes et
4	), les féministes mènent une nouvelle	<b>bataille</b>	contre la « langue française sexiste ». Une
5	qui lance mardi, avec Les Chiennes de garde, une	<b>campagne</b>	pour la fin de la case "mademoiselle". "Cela
6	, la féminisation des noms devient un	<b>combat</b>	. Retour sur un siècle de polémiques Quoi de plus
7	mais aussi un combat, une victoire ou une	<b>défaite</b>	. Il y a des mots qui expriment le pouvoir d'
8	féministes ont décidé de partir en	<b>guerre</b>	contre la case "mademoiselle" des formulaires
9	métiers et que ceux de droite s'y refusent. La	<b>lutte</b>	pour l'égalité passe par la lutte contre la
10	coquetterie grammaticale, encouragée par les	<b>militants</b>	de la théorie du genre, a même fait son
11	, n'aient rien de plus urgent à régler que des	<b>querelles</b>	linguistiques animées par des principes
12	les parlementaires, difficile de donner un	<b>vainqueur</b>	. L'Académie française préfère "laisser
13	des formulaires administratifs. Une petite	<b>victoire</b>	pour Osez le féminisme! et Les Chiennes de garde
14	de la famille et de la femme, et une polémique	<b>violente</b>	pour les deux sujets en question, mais pas
15	droits avancent rarement spontanément... Une	<b>violence</b>	symbolique L'appellation "mademoiselle" et

The debate on gender-inclusive language is described by both supporters and detractors in equal measure as a metaphorical battle. Concordance table 1 shows just 15 examples of lemmas from my corpus that construct this metaphor, which are in bold in the centre, with some context on either side.

In line 13 of the table above, the journalist describes the *victoire* ‘victory’ that the feminists groupes *Osez le féminisme* and *Chiennes de garde* have just won in their campaign to eliminate *mademoiselle* from official government forms. Supporters of gender-fair language conceptualise language as a potential tool, or even an *arme* ‘weapon’ in line 1, that can and should be used to fight against sexism. From this perspective, the battle against sexism using language makes logical sense.

On the other hand, detractors of gender-inclusive language often reject the metaphor of LANGUAGE IS A WEAPON and argue that there are more important things to do to reduce sexism than splitting hairs over grammar. In line 11, the journalist derides the *querelles* ‘quarrels’ over gender-inclusive language as being trivial, suggesting that there are more urgent matters to deal with. In this way, detractors can refute potential charges of sexism while at the same time ridiculing gender-fair language. They argue that time and resources should be spent fighting against physical violence against women, rather than wasting time arguing about language. From this perspective, those who support gender-fair language are fighting the wrong battle and are in fact harming the French language. In line 4, feminists are described as conducting a new battle against « *la langue française sexiste* » “the sexist French language”. Pragmatically, the use of scare quotes here performs the evaluative function of epistemic distancing — the journalist is essentially disputing the validity of the proposition “the French language is sexist”. Feminists are thus waging a battle on an imaginary enemy, which a closer reading of the article confirmed.

The relative frequency<sup>13</sup> (hereafter RF) for this cluster in the French corpus was 2910 RF. War / violence lemmas were also present in a comparable English corpus that I created, but to a significantly lesser extent — 1730 RF for this cluster of lemmas, or 1.7 times more frequent in the French corpus. This can be partly explained by the top-down nature of language planning in France — because the French state is so heavily involved in language planning, this means that more politicians are involved. The debate is carried out on the national political stage and is therefore often instrumentalised to score political points and gain media

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<sup>13</sup> Relative frequency is calculated by dividing the number of occurrences of a particular lemma in a corpus by the total number of words in the corpus and then multiplying by 1 000 000. This allows an accurate comparison between corpora of different sizes.

attention for individual politicians. On the other hand, language planning in the UK takes a much more bottom-up approach. It is often up to individual companies, universities, and local authorities to decide upon their own language guidelines. As the debate takes place on a more local level in the UK, there is less national media attention, and the debate therefore does not provide the same opportunities for UK politicians to harness the media for their own political gain.

The use of war / violence metaphors has also been noted by other scholars working on gender and language (Hellinger 2011: 578; Sunderland 2004: 42) and confirms Lakoff & Johnson's finding that "ARGUMENT IS WAR [...] we don't just talk about arguments in terms of war. We actually win or lose arguments. [...] Many of the things we do in arguing are partially structured by the concept of war [...] it structures the actions we perform in arguing" (Lakoff & Johnson 1980: 4–5).

#### 4.2 LANGUAGE IS A PERSON

What is perhaps more interesting with the war / violence metaphor is that not only is the debate framed as a metaphorical battle, but in this battle the victim is often language itself in the French corpus.

Although the great majority of war / violence lemmas in my corpus refer to the debate itself, there are numerous occurrences that describe *language* as being under attack. This is something that has already been noted by Cameron, who argues that "there is something absurd about the notion that language or words can be attacked independently of their users. There is also something disingenuous about it, since by setting language up as a thing, a monolith, it stops us asking whose words, images and traditions will be under attack if the conventions are changed" (Cameron 1992: 102).

The argument that language itself is under attack is used by detractors, rather than supporters and is found in other languages (see Hergenhan 2020 for German and Le Bouteillec 2020 for Swedish). If supporters draw upon this discourse, it is to argue for gender-fair language. There are only a handful of examples in my corpus (including lines 4 and 8 in Concordance table 2) in which supporters of gender-inclusive language claimed that the language needed to be defended or that violence was being inflicted on language. In line 4 the rule of proximity (see footnote n°9) is described as being *défendue* 'defended' by feminists in 2012 and in line 8 the journalist claims that three centuries ago the Académie française *figé* 'froze' the French language and imposed the superiority of one gender over the other.

All the other occurrences of the idea of language being under attack are to argue against gender-inclusive language. In line 1, the journalist bemoans the ex-

Concordance table 2: Some examples of war / violence lemmas used to describe language as being under attack

1	à quel point l'écriture inclusive	<b>abîmait,</b>	, selon lui, la langue française . « C'est la
2	), les féministes mènent une nouvelle	<b>bataille</b>	contre la « langue française sexiste ». Une
3	, Alain Rey considère qu'il s'agit là d'un	<b>« barbarisme »</b>	, c'est-à-dire d'un emprunt à l'étranger.
4	chevalier à Roncevaux, la règle de proximité	<b>défundue</b>	par les féministes de 2012. "La langue du Moyen
5	sous le titre : « Non à une langue	<b>défigurée</b>	». M. Maurice Druon reprenait le 12 janvier
6	d'une terrible entrave à la liberté ou d'une	<b>destruction</b>	de la langue française pourrait sembler risible,
7	tribune politique pour ses idées, quitte à	<b>écraser</b>	la grammaire, le statut de l'Académie
8	Depuis que l'Académie française a	<b>figé</b>	la langue française et qu'elle a imposé la
9	Progrès féministe pour les uns,	<b>massacre</b>	de la langue française pour les autres
10	"l'essor de l'écriture inclusive qui	<b>gangrène</b>	notre société. "
11	Je considère que notre langue est	<b>menacée</b>	, qu'elle perd de son excellence, de sa beauté.
12	C'est la chair même du français qui est ainsi	<b>rongée</b>	, et son esprit qui se trouve frappé d'une sorte
13	pour tenter d'effacer cette hiérarchie, faire	<b>violence</b>	tant aux fondements de la linguistique, qui nous
14	imprononçable. Mais Macron est le premier à	<b>violer</b>	la règle grammaticale du masculin compris comme
15	la langue, ni prescrire des règles qui	<b>violeraient</b>	la grammaire ou la syntaxe: elle n'est pas en

tent to which *écriture inclusive* ‘inclusive writing’<sup>14</sup> *abimait* ‘ruined’ the French language. Maurice Druon (chair of the Académie française from 1985 to 1999) describes language as being *défigurée* ‘disfigured’ in line 5. In line 14, president Macron is being criticised for being *le premier à violer la règle grammaticale du masculin compris comme un mot neutre : il truffe ses discours d'insupportables « celles et ceux » égalitaristes* ‘the first to violate the grammatical rule of the masculine understood as neutral: he stuffs his speeches full of intolerable egalitarian ‘celles et ceux’<sup>15</sup>.

These kinds of arguments are only coherent if language is conceptualised as a living being, and particularly, as a person, who can be disfigured (line 5), or massacred (line 9) and who needs to be defended (line 8). An abstract entity like language cannot literally be disfigured, massacred, or defended, but a person can. Line 12 is worth quoting in more detail as it provides an excellent example of the metaphor LANGUAGE IS A PERSON.

Ce français défiguré, atteint d'une maladie qui couvre la page d'une sorte d'eczéma, [...] c'est la chair même du français qui est rongée, et son esprit qui se trouve frappé d'une sorte de bégaiement cérébral”

[This disfigured French, suffering from a disease that covers the page with a sort of eczema, [...] it is the very flesh of French that is eaten away, and its mind that is stricken with a sort cerebral stutter.]

Michael Edwards : « Comment lire ce charabia ? » [How does one read this goobledygook?], *Le Figaro*, 15/10/2017

In this example, the French language is conceptualised as a person with a physical body, and a mind, suffering from several ailments that are destroying its health (see Ivanov 2022 for metaphors of disease in German). Another example of language suffering from very human ailments can be found in line 10 in which inclusive writing is described as a social *gangrène* ‘gangrene’, in other words a type of tissue death that is eating away at the flesh of language.

In line 3 we also see the French language being attacked, but this time by foreign *barbarismes* ‘barbarisms’. The lemma BARBARISME appears seven times in my corpus (RF 4), each time in relation to language. The etymology of *barbarism* (i.e., ‘foreign speech’) is specifically mentioned in line 3:

<sup>14</sup> *Écriture inclusive* has recently become the umbrella term in France for any kind of gender-inclusive language.

<sup>15</sup> *Celles*<sub>MASC</sub> and *ceux*<sub>FEM</sub> are demonstrative pronouns that translate as ‘those’, e.g., *all those wishing to...*

À la même époque, l'influence des féminisations québécoises a traversé l'Atlantique. On a ainsi vu apparaître *auteure*, puis *défenseure*. En tant que linguiste, Alain Rey considère qu'il s'agit là d'un « barbarisme », c'est-à-dire d'un emprunt à l'étranger.

[At the same time, the influence of feminisations from Quebec came across the Atlantic. So, we saw *auteure* ['author' in the feminine], then *défenseure* ['defendant' in the feminine], appear. As a linguist, Alain Rey considers this a 'barbarism', in other words, a foreign borrowing.]

Explication ; La féminisation des noms, une querelle franco-française [Explantation; The feminisation of nouns, a Franco-French quarrel], *La Croix*, 09/10/2014

In France, feminist linguistic reform has often been criticised as a foreign influence, specifically from English, or from Quebecois French, where American English is seen as having an undue influence on French. The term *anglicisme* 'anglicism' is in fact a keyword in my corpus, with a keyword score<sup>16</sup> of 32. A word sketch of its collocates (the terms that frequently appear in close proximity) shows its negative semantic prosody (the way that a seemingly neutral word can be perceived positively or negatively because of the words that it collocates frequently with). The first rows of each column in Figure 2 serve as good illustrations of the negative semantic prosody of the term: anglicisms are 'proliferating' (*proliférer*), they are 'infiltrating' (*infiltrer*), and they are 'invasive' (*envahissant*).

This argument is nothing new. Even in the 1980s, gender-inclusive language was criticised as a foreign anglophone influence, and as something alien to the French language, and French culture.

In my corpus, one view of language is that it is seen as needing protection from foreign barbarisms, which begin as an external threat, but which are then taken up by certain groups of French-speakers and thus become a threat from within. Paradoxically, this argument seems to have less *ideological force* (Del-Teso-Craviotto 2006) in other French-speaking countries such as Quebec and Switzerland, even though the French language is in a more linguistically insecure position in these areas than it is in France.

Arguments based on the idea that gender-inclusive language is harming the French language can be explained by the metaphor LANGUAGE IS A PERSON. Language being disfigured, covered in eczema, its flesh eaten away by gangrene, etc can only make sense if language is conceptualised as a living entity, and more specifically, as a person. In the next part, I will argue that the metaphor of LAN-

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<sup>16</sup> Keyword score is calculated by dividing the normalised frequency per million words in the reference corpus by the normalised frequency per million words in the focus corpus. For example, *anglicisme* has a keyword score of 32, which means that it appears 32 times more often in my corpus than we would expect it to when compared to the reference corpus.

↔	☰	🔍	✕	↔	☰	🔍	✕	↔	☰	🔍	✕
<b>verbs with "anglicisme" as object</b>				<b>verbs with "anglicisme" as subject</b>				<b>modifiers of "anglicisme"</b>			
<b>proliférer</b>	...	prolifèrent les anglicismes		<b>infiltrer</b>	...	anglicismes s'infiltrent		<b>envahissant</b>	...	anglicismes envahissants	
<b>classer</b>	...	classer ces anglicismes		<b>crever</b>	...	anglicismes crèvent		<b>disgracieux</b>	...	disgracieux anglicisme	
<b>éviter</b>	...	éviter cet ignoble anglicisme		<b>détruire</b>	...	anglicismes qui détruisent		<b>barbare</b>	...	anglicisme barbare	
<b>oublier</b>	...	oublier les anglicismes		<b>risquer</b>	...	anglicisme qui risque		<b>inutile</b>	...	anglicismes inutiles	
<b>utiliser</b>	...	utiliserais pas un tel anglicisme		<b>aller</b>	...	anglicismes ne vont		<b>ignoble</b>	...	ignoble anglicisme	
<b>venir</b>	...	vient cet anglicisme		<b>pouvoir</b>	...	anglicisme que l'on peut		<b>conquérant</b>	...	anglicisme conquérant	
<b>donner</b>	...	donne les anglicismes		<b>être</b>	...	anglicismes sont		<b>innombrable</b>	...	innombrables anglicismes	
<b>être</b>	...	est un anglicisme						<b>pire</b>	...	pires anglicismes	
								<b>meilleur</b>	...	meilleurs anglicismes	
								<b>tel</b>	...	tel anglicisme	
								<b>autre</b>	...	autres anglicisme	

Figure 2: Word sketch for the term *anglicisme* 'anglicism'

GUAGE IS A PERSON is part of a superordinate metaphor A NATION IS A PERSON both of which are linked via the metonymic relation LANGUAGE FOR NATION.

#### 4.3 LANGUAGE FOR NATION

The metaphor A NATION IS A PERSON is a common metaphor that has already been noted by many scholars (Charteris-Black 2004: 16; Musolff 2020, Šarić 2015). Charteris-Black classes this metaphor as a conceptual key (Charteris-Black: 15), in other words a higher-level metaphor which explains other related metaphors. Thus, A NATION IS A PERSON is a conceptual key which explains the conceptual metaphor FRANCE IS A PERSON. I argue that the two metaphors A NATION IS A PERSON and LANGUAGE IS A PERSON are linked via the metonymic relation LANGUAGE FOR NATION.



Concordance table 3: Some examples of lemmas used for the metonym LANGUAGE FOR NATION

1	La langue est le	<b>ciment</b>	d'une communauté nationale.
2	pas une affaire légère. La langue est le	<b>ciment</b>	de notre pays : lorsque deux orthographes, deux
3	Le langage est le premier	<b>ciment</b>	de la vie collective.
4	mettent en danger la communauté	<b>nationale.</b>	
5	le français est à la base de votre identité	<b>nationale</b>	nationale. La France a été forgée par la langue,
6	française a souvent agi comme un facteur d'unité	<b>nationale</b>	... Aimer le français, c'est aimer la France. Parler
7	"Le premier instrument du	<b>génie</b>	du peuple, c'est sa langue", Stendhal Cette
8	substance un certain Albert Camus: « Ma	<b>patrie</b>	, c'est la langue française.»
9	"Le premier instrument du génie du	<b>peuple</b>	, c'est sa langue", Stendhal Cette semaine, une
10	langue meurt avec ses couleurs, ses nuances, le	<b>peuple</b>	meurt aussi" (Maïlla Talvio)
11	demandeur. Je l'ai dit et redit : la langue d'un	<b>peuple</b>	est son âme. La France va mal. Mais comment
12	détruirons avec elle non seulement notre idéal	<b>républicain</b>	et notre culture, mais notre civilisation elle-même.
13	française, une seule grammair et une seule	<b>Républicain</b>	».
14	à l'école " Notre langue est le premier	<b>trésor</b>	français, celui qui nous relie tous et fait notre
15	qu'une Nation ?». Je crois que le lien qui	<b>unit</b>	, en France tout du moins, la langue à la patrie est

Concordance table 3 shows some examples of the metonym LANGUAGE FOR NATION. The first three lines describe language as the *ciment* ‘cement’ of a national community (line 1), of *notre pays* ‘our country’ (line 2) and of *la vie collective* ‘collective life’ (line 3). Line 11 claims that *la langue d’un peuple est son âme* ‘the language of a people is its soul’ and that *la France va mal* ‘France is in a bad way’. This metaphor is used by detractors of gender-fair language, and only very rarely by supporters. Supporters occasionally acknowledge that language is a heritage, but it is rarely, if ever, linked to national identity. Line 6 is an extract of an interview with author Lorànt Deutsch and provides a good example of this metaphor:

Vous montrez à travers votre livre que la langue française a souvent agi comme un facteur d'unité nationale...

Aimer le français, c'est aimer la France. Parler le français, c'est déjà s'emparer de cette identité.

[You show through your book that the French language has often acted as a factor in national unity...

Loving French is to love France. Speaking French is already to take possession of this identity.]

Lorànt Deutsch : « Aimer le français, c'est aimer la France » [Lorànt Deutsch: “Loving French is to love France”], *Le Figaro*, 18/10/2018

The title of this article, “Loving French is to love France”, implies that if a person does not love the French language, they do not love France, effectively calling into question their allegiance to the nation. According to Lorànt Deutsch, *speaking* French is an intrinsic part of *being* French. This idea may seem like common sense to many citizens living in monolingual countries. However, it is less logical in multilingual countries such as Switzerland, Belgium, or Canada, where language is not necessarily an marker of *national* identity. It is therefore important to compare the discourses and metaphors circulating in the debate in France, with those circulating in other francophone countries to better unravel how language intersects with national identity in specific contexts.

Line 5 is from an interview with authors Julie Barlow and Jean-Benoît Nadeau, two Quebecois journalists living in France, on the release of their 2018 book *Ainsi parlent les Français* ‘This is how the French speak’.

Mais on oublie que le français est à la base de votre identité nationale. La France a été forgée par la langue, donc il y a quelque chose d'intemporel. Vous considérez la langue comme un monument et l'Académie française est son musée. [...]

[But we forget that French is the basis of your national identity. France was forged through language, so there is something timeless. You consider language as a monument and the Académie française is its museum.]

Quand deux Québécois analysent la langue et les expressions des Français, [When two Quebecois analyse the language and expressions of the French], *Le Figaro*, 20/12/2018

The authors do not deny that the French language is also important in Quebec, but they do argue that it plays a more important role in national identity in France, and that the French nation itself was forged through the French language. As argued in previous work (Coady 2020), the French language has played a major role in the French nation building project since the French Revolution. This close tie between language and nation is therefore manifest in any debate about language, whether gender-inclusive language, the use of anglicisms or regional dialects. The same article goes on to link language to a specific kind of national identity, Republicanism:

Les principes républicains sont tellement forts en France qu'ils empêchent les Français de parler d'assimilation, d'ethnie, de religion, d'intégration. Ils s'interdisent de parler de sujets extrêmement sensibles. Mais comment agir sur quelque chose si l'on n'a pas de moyen d'en parler? Le politiquement correct est une tentative très maladroite de décrire une réalité.

[Republican principles are so strong in France that they prevent the French from talking about assimilation, ethnicity, religion, integration. They forbid themselves from speaking about extremely sensitive subjects. But how do you act on something if you don't have a means to talk about it? Political correctness is a very clumsy attempt to describe a reality.]

Quand deux Québécois analysent la langue et les expressions des Français [When two Quebecois analyse the language and expressions of the French], *Le Figaro*, 20/12/2018

The lemmas LANGUE 'LANGUAGE' and RÉPUBLIQUE 'REPUBLIC' have a keyword score of 8 in my corpus and the collocation *identité française* 'French identity' has a keyword score of 7. In other words, they appear more often than expected in debates about gender-fair language, thus suggesting that questions of national identity, and of the French Republic are intimately tied up in the gender-inclusive language debate in France.

The three pillars of the French Republic are *liberté, égalité, fraternité* 'freedom, equality, solidarity' but it also includes separation of Church and state, and universalism. A French citizen is not defined by ethnicity, religion, gender, sexuality or any other group. Since 1978 it has been illegal to collect any kind of data on French citizens regarding their ethnicity, sexuality, etc. The concept of universalism — that no distinction is made between citizens based on group identity is deeply rooted in French society. Recently, however, criticisms like the one in the above extract have been made against a universalism that purposefully ignores social tensions based on group identities, rather than recognising that being part of a minority (a woman, part of the LGBTQIA+ community, a person of colour, etc) might in fact make a difference to how a person experiences their citizenship.

Defence of Republican principles has been very effectively harnessed by right-wing detractors of gender-inclusive language, who accuse supporters of not just wanting to modify certain elements of language use, but of destroying *non seulement notre idéal républicain et notre culture, mais notre civilisation elle-même* ‘not only our republican ideal and our culture, but our civilisation itself’ (line 12). This article goes on to claim that *L'écriture inclusive montre même une certaine haine de la langue, au nom de l'égalité homme-femme* ‘inclusive writing even demonstrates a certain hatred for the language, in the name of gender equality’ (*Jean-Michel Delacomptée défenseur de « notre langue »* ‘Jean-Michel Delacomptée defender of “our language”’, *Ouest-France*, 07/10/2018).

This is not to say that supporters of gender-inclusive language do not support Republican values, but rather to demonstrate how detractors have managed to draw the debate about language into a wider debate about nation and portray supporters as enemies of the Republic.

A 2017 tweet mentioned in my corpus from Jean-Michel Blanquer (Figure 3), Minister of Education from 2017 to 2022, succinctly captures the essence of this idea:



**Jean-Michel Blanquer** ✓  
@jmblanquer

Il y a une seule langue française, une seule grammaire, une seule République.

16:02 · 15/11/2017

**5896** J'aime **3437** Retweets **1108** citations

Figure 3: Jean-Michel Blanquer's 2017 tweet “one French language, one grammar, one Republic”

Drawing on discourses of one language one nation, Blanquer claims that “there is one French language, one grammar, one Republic”. This tweet was posted in response to the 2017 online petition signed by over 300 teachers who refused to teach the grammatical rule that the masculine takes precedence (see Introduction). With this tweet Blanquer indirectly accused these teachers, and anyone else who uses gender-inclusive language, as attacking the French Republic itself.

Indeed, several keywords in my corpus show that the gender-inclusive language debate has become part of a culture war in France over the past few years. For instance, in my corpus the first mention of *woke* and *wokeism* ‘woke culture’, which have respective keyword scores of 147 and 91, was in 2020. Yet even before the advent of *wokeism*, gender-inclusive language was decried as the influence of radical feminism from the USA and UK. Gender-inclusive language has always

been portrayed as an insidious foreign influence that is a danger for French culture (see part 4.2 for collocations of *anglicisme*).

The metonymic relation of LANGUAGE FOR NATION is by no means new or restricted to French. The mobilisation of language in the service of nation building has long been an important political tool in various languages (Blommaert 2006: 518; Galbraith 1941; Woolard 1998: 17; Woolard 2004). In the French context, Lodge notes the strong link between language as national identity:

the nation desperately needed a new symbol for its identity to ensure solidarity within France and distinctiveness without. The French standard language was roped in for the job. [...]. Since the French language is now the symbol of nation, failure to use the national language and even failure to use it 'properly' makes you a traitor to the national cause. (Lodge 1998: 30)

In this quote, Lodge is referring to speaking standard French as opposed to regional dialects, but this same metonym is mobilised today to delegitimise gender-fair language.

#### 4.4 THE FRENCH LANGUAGE IS A WOMAN

Anatole France, (1844–1924) French author and member of the Académie française famously compared the French language to a beautiful woman:

La langue française est une femme. Et cette femme est si belle, si fière, si modeste, si hardie, touchante, voluptueuse, chaste, noble, familière, folle, sage, qu'on l'aime de toute son âme, et qu'on n'est jamais tenté de lui être infidèle.

[The French language is a woman. And this woman is so beautiful, so proud, so modest, so bold, touching, voluptuous, chaste, noble, familiar, crazy, wise, that one loves her with all one's soul, and one is never tempted to be unfaithful to her.]

This kind of personification makes sense when we remember that nations are frequently represented as women (Šarić 2015, Yuval-Davis & Anthias 1989). Therefore, if a NATION IS A PERSON, and more specifically a woman, and language represents the nation, the metaphor LANGUAGE IS A WOMAN is coherent. Other scholars have also identified this metaphor, for instance Underhill (2011) gives numerous examples of French being “considered as an object of veneration and desire” by male scholars (Underhill 2011: 173).

Although the above quotes are not from my corpus, several lexical items in my corpus suggested that language was indeed being personified as a woman in this way. However, there was no indication of this metaphor from the quantita-

Concordance table 4: some lemmas used in the metaphor LANGUAGE IS A WOMAN

1	de lire « sur des livres papier », d'	<b>aimer</b>	la belle langue française et les exhorte à combattre
2	« charabia imprononçable » qui a ulcéré les	<b>amoureux</b>	de la langue française. À la mairie de Paris, au
3	Ces suggestions hérissent des	<b>amoureux</b>	de la langue française, mais les partisans d'une
4	est une chanson douce, une ode à la	<b>beauté</b>	de la langue française. Aujourd'hui, cet amoureux
5	l'écriture inclusive - crime contre notre	<b>belle langue</b>	française - ou encore la théorie du genre qui finira
6	d'égalité, l'inquiète. " Protéger notre	<b>belle langue</b>	de ces dérives " Pour l'édile antibois, " la langue
7	veut vider la langue française de ses	<b>charmes</b>	, de ses nuances et des mots qui ne se laissent pas
8	force (masculine ?) soit au féminin et le	<b>charme</b>	(féminin ?) au masculin. Si l'on va jusqu'aux
9	porter atteinte à cette fluidité, à cette	<b>élégance</b>	? Cette nouvelle graphie ajoute de la complexité
10	Écriture inclusive : halte au	<b>harcèlement</b>	textuel !
11	que "La France a comme emblème une femme,	<b>Marianne</b>	, l'un de ses plus beaux mots est féminin, la
12	de la République française, la langue	<b>mère</b>	de la francophonie et notre propre langue
13	beaucoup de leurs aînés, ils n'ont aucune	<b>passion</b>	pour la beauté de la langue et des œuvres du passé.
14	Cela prouve que le français exerce une	<b>séduction</b>	sur les gens, grâce à la culture, au rayonnement de
15	la langue, ni prescrire des règles qui	<b>violeraient</b>	la grammaire ou la syntaxe: elle n'est pas en

tive analysis. It was only during the qualitative phase of analysis that I noticed the use of certain lexical items from the semantic field of love and desire (*amoureux* ‘in love’, *charme* ‘charm’, *passion* ‘passion’, *séduction* ‘seduction’, etc) in relation to language. Based on previous research, I searched for any other terms that seemed relevant. After manually searching the corpus for more evidence I found approximately 30 examples, 15 of which are in Concordance table 4.

The metaphor LANGUAGE IS A WOMAN was particularly difficult to spot in my corpus because *langue* ‘language’ is grammatically feminine in French. Therefore, it is not always clear whether language is being personified specifically as a woman, or simply as a person, and because *langue* is grammatically feminine, the adjectives describing it are necessarily in the feminine. For instance, just because language is described as beautiful (*belle langue* — e.g., lines 5 and 6) does not necessarily mean it is being personified as a woman. Nevertheless, the collocation *belle langue* is much stronger in my corpus than it is in the reference corpus — it has a collocation score of 11.9 in my corpus when compared to the reference corpus. This means that in the gender-inclusive language debate, language is conceptualised as beautiful almost 12 times more often than it is in other contexts. In the reference corpus the adjective *belle* in the feminine is 1.7 times more frequent (1.23 RF) than *beau* in the masculine (74 RF) and women are described as beautiful (*belle femme* — 0.5 RF) 2.5 times more often as men are described as handsome (*bel homme* — 0.2 RF). These statistics indicate that we conceptualise grammatically feminine nouns (women and inanimate objects) as beautiful significantly more often than we conceptualise grammatically masculine nouns (men and inanimate objects) as beautiful or handsome. Studies in cognitive linguistics (e.g., Boroditsky, Schmidt & Phillips 2003) corroborate this analysis. They show that speakers tend to conceptualise objects in agreement with their grammatical gender. The idea of conceptualising language as a woman, because *langue* is a feminine noun is therefore coherent from this perspective.

In lines 2 and 3 *amoureux de la langue française* ‘lovers of the French language’ suggests a romantic relationship between speakers (here *amoureux* is in the masculine plural) and language (grammatically feminine), that is highly reminiscent of Anatole France’s ode to the beautiful French language quoted above.

There are also several references to the *charme* ‘charm’ of the French language (e.g., lines 7 and 8). *Charm* is not a gendered term *per se*, but when analysed in the light of the other terms which are used to describe language in my corpus, such as *beauty*, it does seem to have gendered connotations. In the reference corpus when the terms *charme* and *beauté* ‘beauty’ are found together, they overwhelmingly refer to women. The following quote from line 8 illustrates the gendered connotations of the word *charme*.

Pourquoi faut-il que la force (masculine ?) soit au féminin et le charme (féminin ?) au masculin. Si l'on va jusqu'aux organes sexuels, on découvre que ceux des mâles sont généralement féminins et ceux des femmes le plus souvent masculins.

[Why does strength (masculine?) have to be feminine and charm (feminine?) masculine. If we go to the genitals, we discover that those of males are generally feminine and those of women [sic] most often masculine.]

Écriture inclusive : le triste français du “point milieu” [Gender-inclusive language: the pitiful French of the middot], *L'Opinion*, 20/10/2017

*La force*<sub>FEM</sub> ‘strength’ is grammatically feminine, and *le charme*<sub>MASC</sub> ‘charm’ is grammatically masculine, even though, as the author of this article points out, *strength* has connotations of masculinity, whereas *charm* has connotations of femininity. This is not to say that a woman cannot be strong, and a man charming, however, it seems that in the context of my corpus the word *charme* has feminine connotations.

In line 15, grammar and syntax are described as being ‘violated’. This article was written by the Académie française, who describes the feminisation of certain job titles as resulting in *barbarisms*, which essentially amounts to violating grammar. The term *violer* in French has two principal meanings: the first is to violate a rule, and the second is to rape. It is admittedly unclear that any play on words was intentional in this extract as the term *violer* is commonly used in other contexts to refer to laws, rules or treaties being violated. Nevertheless, when this extract is read with the larger context in mind and the network of metaphors and metonymic relations that gender-inclusive language is part of, this interpretation seems coherent. This is because words have conceptual baggage (McConnell-Ginet 2008), i.e., all the connotations that a particular word has amassed through being used repeatedly in particular contexts. It could therefore be argued that in the above extract, the word *violer* will activate connotations of sexual violence, even if the primary meaning in this extract is ‘violate’ and not ‘rape’. Corpus linguists use the notion of *lexical priming* (Hoey 2005), that is, the idea that when a particular word is used, all the connotations that it invokes for the reader/listener are primed, ready to be called upon to interpret what is being said. In an article that mentions things happening “against the wishes of the women concerned” and that “hurrying or forcing” will cause harm, I argue that it is more than possible that the term *violer* will activate connotations of sexual violence.

The metaphor of THE FRENCH LANGUAGE IS A WOMAN is also part of a network with the metonym LANGUAGE FOR NATION. Jean-Michel Blanquer reinforced his 2017 tweet by evoking Marianne, the feminine allegory of the French Republic (line 11).



La France a comme emblème une femme, Marianne, l'un de ses plus beaux mots est féminin, la République, et notre langue a porté bien des combats féministes, hier, aujourd'hui et encore demain.

[France has a woman, Marianne, as its emblem, one of its the most beautiful words is feminine, Republic, and our language has carried many feminist battles, yesterday, today, and again tomorrow.]

N'y a-t-il vraiment qu'« une langue française » ? [Isn't there really just “one French language”?], *Libération*, 17/11/2017

This quote exemplifies the complex network that language, gender and nation are part of. Both Marianne and the French language stand in for the nation and are represented as women. The tradition of feminine allegories to represent nations is well documented. In addition, the representation of nation as a mother figure giving birth to her nation's people has long been noted by feminist scholars (the word *nation* comes from the Latin verb *nasci* ‘be born’). Heß & Klee (2021) note that,

There is perhaps no greater portrayal of this blood-and-soil tying of people to homeland than the gendered symbol of the mother giving birth to the nation's people. We are all familiar with the representation of nations in the form of female national personifications — a Britannia, a Germania, a Mother Russia. [...] Women reproduce the nation biologically and ideologically, they signify and reproduce boundaries between groups (Yuval-Davis & Anthias, 1989).

This idea is also found in my corpus. In line 12 the author refers to the French as *la langue officielle de la République française* ‘the official language of the French Republic’, *la langue mère*<sup>17</sup> ‘the mother language’ of *la francophonie*<sup>18</sup> as well as *notre propre langue maternelle* ‘our own mother tongue’.

Or quel trait d'identité d'un peuple paraît plus évident que la langue maternelle dont il use ? La nécessaire défense de la francophonie impose de respecter la centralité du français hexagonal, non parce que celui-ci serait par nature supérieur, mais tout simplement parce que c'est à la fois la langue officielle de la République française, la langue mère de la francophonie et notre propre langue maternelle.

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<sup>17</sup> *Langue mère*, literally ‘mother language’, refers to a language from which others are derived, e.g., Latin is the ‘mother language’ of French, Italian, and Spanish. In the above quote, it seems to refer to standard mainland French giving birth, so to speak, to all the varieties of French in other French-speaking countries.

<sup>18</sup> *La francophonie* can either refer to the 321 million French speakers across the world, or the International Organisation of la Francophonie — an organisation of 88 member countries dedicated to promoting the French language, political, educational, economic, and cultural cooperation.

[And yet which facet of a people's identity seems more obvious than the mother tongue that it uses. The necessary defence of *francophone* imposes a respect for the centrality of mainland France, not because it is naturally superior, but quite simply because it is the official language of the French Republic, the mother language of francophonie and our own mother tongue.]

Jean-Michel Delacomptée : « L'écriture inclusive défigure outrageusement toute langue » [Jean-Michel Delacomptée: "Gender-inclusive language excessively disfigures every language"], *Le Figaro*, 07/09/2018

These examples illustrate the complex network of metaphors that link what, at first sight, can seem unrelated — gender-inclusive language and the defence of the nation. If the metaphor THE NATION IS A WOMAN enables inferences such as “the motherland is a woman's body and as such in potential danger of violation by foreign males” (Šarić 2015: 57), then metaphors of grammar being violated by foreign barbarisms instantly becomes much more coherent.

## 5 Conclusion

This paper set out to examine three metaphors and one metonym used in the gender-inclusive language debate in France: THE GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE DEBATE IS A BATTLE, LANGUAGE IS A PERSON, LANGUAGE FOR NATION, and THE FRENCH LANGUAGE IS A WOMAN. My analysis demonstrates that these metaphors and metonym are part of a network of ideas, that need to be understood in relation to one another rather than separately. Indeed, these ideas are coherent only when they are understood in the wider perspective of this network.

The metaphor THE GENDER-INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE DEBATE IS A BATTLE is used by both supporters and detractors. For supporters, the battle is against gender discrimination, whereas detractors are fighting an existential battle to save the nation from the influence of “foreign barbarisms”, promoted by “woke ideology”. As mentioned in the introduction, “pronouncements about language belong to a ‘double discourse’ in which language is simultaneously both itself and a symbolic substitute for something else” (Cameron 2003: 448–49). The gender-fair language debate is not simply a debate about middots and the feminisation of job titles, for detractors, it is often a debate about the moral order and survival of the Republic.

Language is frequently conceptualised as being under attack from foreign barbarisms, diseases or radical “woke ideologues”. Language being physically wounded is only coherent if we accept the metaphor LANGUAGE IS A LIVING ENTITY and in particular LANGUAGE IS A PERSON. Language has played such an important

role in the French nation-building project, that it is intimately bound up in questions of national identity. The metonymic relation LANGUAGE FOR NATION is thus coherent in the French context, but less so in other national contexts. Nations are frequently conceptualised as women needing to be protected, which, along with the metaphors LANGUAGE IS A PERSON and the metonym LANGUAGE FOR NATION, give rise to the metaphor THE FRENCH LANGUAGE IS A WOMAN. Examples found in the corpus confirm that this interpretation is coherent in the gender-inclusive language debate in France. However, this is not to say that every French-speaking country would use the same metaphors given that the socio historical and political context can vary.

It is important to compare the kinds of metaphors used in different areas speaking the same language as well as those used in different languages in order to tease apart the complex network of social, political and linguistic concepts that the gender-inclusive language debate is part of. Equally, a better understanding of exactly how detractors are harnessing gender-inclusive language into a wider attack on progressive politics is essential.

This article was based on an analysis of lexical items and did not include any grammatical analyses. Further research might investigate the colligation, or syntactic patterning, of the metaphors identified, how they fit into larger discourse patterns, or how they are used in conjunction with other rhetorical and argumentative strategies.

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