

L'Académie française and Gender Disparity: The Need for Female Immortals

Meredith Warren

French

Faculty Advisor: Dr. Cathy Jellenik

During the reign of Francis I, in 1539, the King declared that there was one official French, that of the Royal Court, and outlawed other variants.¹ Less than 100 years later, in 1635, *l'Académie française* was officially established under the auspices of Cardinal Richelieu.² *L'Académie française*, or the French Academy, was charged with guarding the integrity and purity of the French language and still continues that mission today.³ There are 40 seats in the Academy and

¹ Thomson, Dale. "Language, Identity, and the Nationalist Impulse: Quebec." *American Academy of Political and Social Science* 538 (1995): 69–82. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/1048327.pdf?refreqid=search%3Ab312c014ef8800b5fe4217c1fa308bcf>

² Castries, de Duc. "Richelieu et l'académie." *Revue Des Deux Mondes*, 1986, 16–22. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/44182617.pdf?refreqid=search%3A21917579ad182cc11e36e9a088556bcf>.

³ *Ibid.*

members are elected for life.⁴ As such, members are known as the Immortals.⁵ Further, prospective Immortals can apply for a vacant seat and are elected by the Academy itself.⁶ This institutional governance of the French language, that has been in operation, officially or unofficially, since 1539, has raised a trove of questions and considerations about the Academy; most notably, the gender disparity of the Immortals. The Academy's first female Immortal was elected in 1980, 340 long years after the creation of the institution, and since then, only eight women have sat as a member of the Academy.⁷ This lack of gender parity represents but a single area wherein the Academy lacks diversity: gender, race, sexual orientation, class, and more. Consequently, the Immortals have experienced gridlock and backlash over their rigidity and inability to adapt to changing French norms.⁸ This paper sets out to chronicle the ways in which gender disparity in the Academy interfaces with the reality of the French linguistic experience. By providing a brief literature review, a discussion of gendered language, and an analysis, it will be clear that the gender disparity in *l'Académie française* ultimately, perpetuates the

⁴ Djébar, Assia. "L'Immortelle: A Conversation with Assia Djébar, A Guardian of the French Language." *World Policy Journal* 29, no. 1 (2019): 43–47. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41510492.pdf?refreqid=search%3Ab312c014ef8800b5fe4217c1fa308bcf>.

⁵ Djébar, 43.

⁶ Ibid.

⁷ Sickie, Keith Van. "Female Immortals - 9 French Intellectuals: Liberté, Égalité, Fraternité." *My French Life*, 2018. Available at: <https://www.myfrenchlife.org/2018/08/23/female-immortals-academie-francaise/>.

⁸ Nossiter, Adam. "The Guardians of the French Language Are Deadlocked, Just Like Their Country." *The New York Times*. March 3, 2019. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/03/world/europe/academie-francaise-france-deadlock.html>

discrimination against women in the French language, and, more broadly, French society.

What makes language important? Something so basic and innate to daily life could, at first glance, appear insignificant. However, many scholars and linguists would argue the opposite -- because it is innate, language is foundational to the human experience. Bussmann writes that language is a "...vehicle for the expression or exchanging of thoughts, concepts, knowledge, and information as well as the fixing and transmission of experience and knowledge."⁹ Further, Elnazarov and Ostler offer that language is "...the currency of human communities."¹⁰ As such, the way humans communicate with one another is worth consideration, study, and perhaps, like Francis I and Cardinal Richelieu would argue, protection.

L'Académie française works diligently to protect the French language from the invasion of non-French words and, according to its statue, is charged with producing an official dictionary of approved words to inform the grammar, syntax, and usage of French.¹¹ For example, when the word 'e-mail' came along in the 1990s, the Academy came up with the appropriate French replacement of '*courriel*.'¹² However, just because the Academy creates a replacement word or

⁹ Bussmann, Hadumod. *Routledge Dictionary of Language and Linguistics*. Edited by Gregory Trauth and Kerstin Kazzazi. 1st ed. New York: Routledge, 1996.

¹⁰ Elnazarov, Hakim, and Ostler, Nicholas. *Endangered Languages and History: Proceedings of the Conference FEL XIII, 24-26 September 2009, Khorog, Tajikistan*. Bath: Foundation for Endangered Languages, 2009.

¹¹ L'academie française. "L'histoire," 2019. Available at: <http://www.academie-francaise.fr/linstitution/lhistoire>.

¹² Samuel, Henry. "The Académie Française: Custodians of the French Language." *The Telegraph*, 2011. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/europe/france/8820701/The-Academie-francaise-custodians-of-the-French-language.html>.

disavows the usage of a non-French word does not necessarily mean that French-speakers will listen; in fact, French-speakers hardly ever use the word '*courriel*.' Indeed, the French Academy's rulings are only advisory and not binding unto the French government or people.¹³ While this may be the case, the Academy wields a great deal of influence and is the simultaneous *de facto* and *de jure* authority on the French language. The French Academy drew inspiration for its model from the *Accademia della Crusca* established in Florence, Italy in 1583.¹⁴ The *Accademia's* name, the Academy of Bran, comes from the notion advanced by the *Accademia's* first members that the institution would be separating the flour, or the good language, from the bran, or the bad language.¹⁵ Ostensibly, this formative model of linguistic institutions was predicated upon the supposed superiority of the Florentine variant of Italian.¹⁶ Moreover, it seems to be a theme amongst linguistic institutions sponsored by government that they are rooted in a believed primacy of a certain version of language.¹⁷

This brings to light the dual nature of the French Academy: is it the divine protector of the sanctity of language or an antiquated and rigid institution? Some in French society would argue that the Academy is the latter. In fact, most recently, individuals both inside and outside of France have been angered over the Academy's refusal to consider the addition of more inclusive language, dubbed *l'écriture inclusive*, that

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ Crusca, della Accademia. "Origins and Foundation," 2019. Available at: <http://www.accademiadellacrusca.it/en/accademia/history/origins-and-foundation>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Tribby, Jay. "Florence, Cultural Capital of Cultural Capital." *Academic Cultures*. Vol. 35. Philadelphia, 1994. Available at: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/41467773.pdf?refreqid=search%3A14b60452c2726767a-f92a5de467cfdd2>

would acknowledge the existence of women and the LGBTQ+ community in the language.¹⁸ This push is thanks to the fact that, in French, and elsewhere, maleness is considered more valuable than femaleness, as evidenced most explicitly by French grammar. For example, if one writes a sentence about a group of women driving in a car, the pronoun would be *elles*, which is feminine. However, if that same group of women plus just one man were driving in a car, the pronoun would become *ils*, which is masculine. This type of ingrained exclusion is harmful because the group of female speakers, collectively, sees themselves erased.

While it might seem particularly timely, the battle for inclusive language has been fought by women for many years. In the 16th century, the official linguistic state advisor, Joseph Dupleix wrote “Because the masculine gender is more noble, it takes precedence alone against two or several feminines, even if these are closer to their adjective.”¹⁹ Advocating for feminine alternatives to pronouns, proper nouns, and more has been an uphill battle. In the 1990s, when then socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin created a mass scandal by stating he would refer to his female ministers as *la ministre* (in which he changed the article, ‘the,’ from the standard masculine to feminine), the Academy denied that this was proper French and that, essentially, the prime minister was in the wrong.²⁰ It is worth mentioning that at the

¹⁸ Samuel, Henry. “French Schoolteachers Push for ‘gender Neutral’ Grammar in Row with Language Purists.” *The Telegraph*, 2017. Available at: <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2017/11/08/french-schoolteachers-push-gender-neutral-grammar-row-language/>.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*

²⁰ Whitney, Craig. “Paris Journal; La Ministre? Over the Immortals’ Dead Bodies.” *The New York Times*. July 1. Available at: <https://www.nytimes.com/1998/07/01/world/paris-journal-la-ministre-over-the-immortals-dead-bodies.html>

time of this debacle, there were only two female Immortals seated on the Academy.

While the Academy has undoubtedly dodged undertaking any changes like *l'écriture inclusive*, in February of 2019, the Academy made a historic decision to allow the feminization of professional job titles.²¹ News outlets like the British publication, *The Guardian*, called the decision a 'minor revolution' in an otherwise prescriptive, traditional, and conservative institution.²² The Academy stated that they saw no obstacle in allowing for the gender changes and that "...all developments in the language [are] aimed at recognising the place women have in society today."²³ So, the question thus arises, what initiated the centuries-old ban on female pronouns and nouns of the French language? The Academy does not provide many insights into the inner-workings of *l'Institut de France* but one thing is clear about how this monumental shift came to be: the report presented to the Academy was drafted by women.²⁴

The committee that was formed to create the report was comprised of three out of the five female Immortals.²⁵ Indeed, there is something to be said for the fact that this ban on diversifying the French language to benefit women was lifted at a time in the Academy's history when five women sit as Immortals. Consequently, there exists a

²¹ Henley, Jon. "Académie Française Allows Feminisation of Job Titles." *The Guardian*, 2019. Available at: <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/mar/01/academie-francaise-allows-feminisation-of-job-titles>.

²² Ibid.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Rérolle, Raphaëlle. "L'Académie Française Se Résout à La Féminisation Des Noms de Métiers." *Le Monde*. February 28, 2019. Available at: https://www.lemonde.fr/societe/article/2019/02/28/l-academie-francaise-se-resout-a-la-feminisation-des-noms-de-metiers_5429632_3224.html

²⁵ Ibid.

plethora of literature on the question of gender equality and how the inclusion of women, in particular, has a twofold effect: inclusion gives women greater representation and also increases the effectiveness of governing institutions as they can better reflect the individuals they serve. Essentially, the inclusion of women helps everyone; whether that is in language, in politics, or, more specifically, in the Academy. Helen Clark, the former prime minister of New Zealand and former director of the United Nations Development Programme, recognized the importance of full inclusion at a speech given to the National Assembly of Wales in 2012.²⁶ Clark says, "...when women are "out of sight, out of mind," meeting their needs does not get prioritized. Conversely, when there is a critical mass of women decision-makers, the issues which previously went unaddressed can become priorities."²⁷

In reference to public service, Clark argues "...advancing women in the ranks of public administration is also important as a gender equality goal, and because gender balance in public administration ensures that a wider range of perspectives is brought to bear on policy-making and service delivery."²⁸ While not explicitly related to traditional public administration, an institution like the French Academy is, seemingly, formulating and directing the policy-making of language. Therefore, the fact that only five out of the current 36 members are women puts women and the female perspective at a clear

²⁶ Clark, Rt Hon Helen. "Helen Clark: "Inclusion and Equality: Why Women's Leadership Matters"." United Nations Development Programme, 2012. Available at: <https://www.undp.org/content/undp/en/home/news-centre/speeches/2012/04/10/helen-clark-inclusion-and-equality-why-women-s-leadership-matters.html>

²⁷ Ibid.

²⁸ Ibid.

disadvantage in the ranks of the Academy and, more importantly, in the French language.

Many linguistic scholars support this hypothesis. First, for instance, Anne-Marie Houdebine-Gravaud, a researcher at the University of Paris Descartes, asserted that the difference in treatment between men and women in the French language leads to discrimination and differentiation.²⁹ In particular, she uses the example of the ban on the feminization of pronouns and nouns as precluding women from reaching equality.³⁰ When women do not see themselves represented in their professions, it is harmful.³¹ Moreover, Houdebine-Gravaud also explores how other linguistic institutions and ministries in Québec, Belgium, and Switzerland have added female writers, female historians, feminist scholars, and female linguists to cabinets.³² Surely, this type of institutional inclusion curtails the inherent discrimination of languages with highly gendered structures. Houdebine-Gravaud goes on to conclude that adapting language to reflect the people can lead to new social realities and create new ideas.³³ Second, more academics like Santacreu-Vasut, Shenkar, and Shoham have explored how languages with intense gender rules actually hinder women from participating in leadership roles in business.³⁴ The data they code, based on an index the

²⁹ Houdebine-Gravaud, Anne-Marie. "Femmes / Langue / Féminisation : Une Expérience de Politique Linguistique En France." *Nouvelles Questions Féministes* 20, no. 1 (1999): 23–52. Available at:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/40619693.pdf?refreqid=excelsior%3A758cbc3ceac7ade7c5512b3c6cb9ed26>.

³⁰ Houdebine-Gravaud, 23.

³¹ *Ibid.*

³² Houdebine-Gravaud, 38.

³³ Houdebine-Gravaud, 47.

³⁴ Santacreu-Vasut, Estefania, Shenkar, Oded, and Shoham, Amir. "Linguistic Gender Marking and Its International Business Ramifications." *Source: Journal of International*

authors created called the Gender Assignment Intensity Index, accounts for all kinds of languages whose gendered grammar and structure is both semantic and formal.³⁵ The authors find that the gender intensity of a certain language's grammar is associated with a lower presence of women participating in business, specifically leadership roles in multinational corporations.³⁶

As such, the discrimination against women that is codified within the French language appears to have a tangible effect on not only how women conceptualize themselves but their opportunities and ability to access different social, political, and economic spheres. Hence, any addition of female Immortals to the Academy constitutes a watershed moment. If one is to take the lifting of the ban on feminization of professional titles as, indeed a 'minor revolution' of the character of the Academy, then adding women seems to produce positive results. More women on the Academy places linguistic policy-making in the hands of individuals who have the power to bring increased representation, and, perhaps as a consequence, curbs the erasure of women in the French language.

These changes will most likely begin slowly. In an institution that has existed for 384 years without diversity on its agenda, the discussions surrounding gender will no doubt be difficult and long. However, the outcomes of the Academy's decisions are of the utmost importance. The judgements made by this elite body do spill over into reality and are woven into the fabric of the French linguistic experience. If the French government espouses a commitment to equality, women ought not be excluded; especially if that exclusion can have a ripple

Business Studies 45, no. 9 (2014): 1170–78. Available at:

<https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/43653843.pdf?refreqid=search%3A9c818c4ca83df39e3c8e988d4fbf2adb>.

³⁵ Santacreu-Vasut, Shenkar, Shoham, 1172.

³⁶ Santacreu-Vasut, Shenkar, Shoham, 1176.

effect of discrimination. Consequently, the French Academy's motto of *À immortalité*, 'to immortality,' should perhaps change to something more fitting to an era wherein five women are Immortals and the feminization of professional titles has begun. Furthermore, French ought to also take further steps towards including language for individuals who identify as neither male nor female. But, for now, if the Academy wants to survive, it must begin to properly reflect the people who speak French; beginning with the other half of the population who are not male.