

From *il* and *elle* to *iel* and *ael*: the French Gender Revolution
A Semantic Model of Pronominal Grammar Changes in French

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Abstract

In recent years, the emancipation of women and the increasing awareness of identities outside the gender binary of man and woman have been a central debate in western society. Since the 2000's the French language has seen linguistic changes reflecting these societal changes. The most recent developments are the so-called *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*. Analysing these language changes, the present thesis focuses on two common neo-pronouns *iel(s)* and *ael(s)* emerging from these societally induced languages changes and investigates their effects on pronominal grammar in French. This research bases itself on a corpus study of the use of these neo-pronouns, creating the foundation for a re-worked model of pronoun resolution within Discourse Representation Theory. Combining the works of Kamp & Reyle (1993), Van der Sandt (1992) and Hunter (2013) this thesis takes a presuppositional approach to pronoun resolution allowing for the inclusion of extra-linguistic information for their interpretation.

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Introduction

In recent years, our (western) society has seen a growing discourse about social gender and sex. These debates range from female emancipation to the recognition of genders outside the traditional binary of man and woman. While the latter can be found in other, non-western societies they are a relatively new concept for the western world (Young, 2019). The maybe most common term to refer to gender identity outside of woman or man is ‘non-binary’ which can be understood as “any gender identity which lies outside the one-or-the-other binary of ‘man’ and ‘woman’, ‘he’ and ‘she’, ‘male’ and ‘female’” (Young, 2019, p.18). Non-binary people therefore often reject the use of traditional binary third person pronouns and resort to different, language-dependent, and personal strategies. In English for example, the most common neutral pronoun used for a non-binary person is singular *they/them*, but we can also find several neo-pronouns used, such as *xe* or *ze* (UNCG Office of Intercultural Engagement, n.d.). While English made use of an existing way of neutral gendering, other languages on the other hand, like Swedish, do not provide such gender-neutral option, forcing them to create new neutral pronouns to add to their lexicon. In the case of the Swedish language, the neutral third person pronoun ‘hen’ was officially added to the lexicon by the Swedish Academy in 2015 (AFP, 2015).

This thesis focuses on a language which has been subject to multiple linguistic changes in the domain of (grammatical) gender: French. Starting with the controversial ‘masculinisation’ of the French language in the 16th century (Viennot, 2017), followed by the counter movement of Feminisation at the end of the 20th and beginning of the 21st century (Cerquiglini, 2018), grammatical gender has often been featured in linguistic changes. Interestingly, these processes refer to an active and external effort to render the language more masculine or feminine regarding their use of grammatical gender. These efforts to change the French language to adequately reflect its speakers do not stop at this binary gender distinction, society’s fight for inclusivity and equality can also be seen in the changes affecting the language’s grammatical gender system. Modern French has a binary grammatical gender system: its two categories are masculine and feminine. This binary distinction forces speakers to choose between the grammatical gender in contexts where more than one gender is present, the gender is unknown or irrelevant. One of the consequences of the so-called masculinisation of the French language claims to provide a solution to this issue: the generic masculine. This practice encourages (or demands) the use of the masculine grammatical gender in situations where the decision is rather difficult, for example when talking about a group of people, resulting in an overwhelming presence of the masculine grammatical gender category in modern French. With the rise of female emancipation and increased awareness of genders outside the gender binary, doubts about the use of the generic masculine arose. Speakers started to question if the masculine forms that claimed to be ‘generic’ were indeed detached from any real-life masculine or male connotations and meanings. Psycholinguistic studies have since shown that in many languages where we find the generic masculine, using the masculine forms in such contexts does not allow for the claimed neutrality (Brauer & Landry, 2008; Sato et al., 2008; Phillips & Boroditsky, 2003; Boroditsky et al., 2003): the real-life male connotation of this grammatical gender category prevail, even if these connotations are not in line with the referent(s). Be it for animate or inanimate nouns, grammatical gender appears to be linked to

be linked to social gender, seen in Boroditsky et al. (2003) where speakers of German and Spanish chose adjectives for inanimate nouns that followed social gender stereotypes. The French language was thus faced with ‘linguistic sexism’: human’s whose gender is not masculine do not find themselves represented in language. In the last 30 decades French speakers started to actively counteract this difficulty posed by the grammatical gender system. After the feminisation of profession nouns in the early 2000’s, efforts turned towards the creation of a more inclusive and gender fair language. A first linguistic phenomenon in that respect was the *Écriture Inclusive* (‘Inclusive Writing’) (example 1a below) which was followed by the *Écriture Neutre* (‘Neutral Writing’) (example 1b below).

- (1)
- a. *fatigué.e*
tired_{MASC.FEM}
 - b. *fatiguæ*
tired_{NEUT}

Illustrated in the example above, we see that the *Écriture Inclusive* ‘s strategy is to include both the masculine root and the feminine gender marker (the additional *-e*) on the same lexeme. In the *Écriture Neutre* on the other hand, the used suffix is neither recognisable as masculine nor feminine, which, following Young’s (2019) definition provided above, can be considered as ‘non-binary’: just like some humans, these word forms lie “outside the one-or-the-other binary” (Young, 2019, p.18).

The topic of societally motivated language changes in French, such as the briefly mentioned *Écriture Inclusive* and *Écriture Neutre* has to this date only scarcely been researched. Works investigating this subject deal with its historic, sociolinguistic, or syntactic aspects (e.g., Alpheratz, 2017, 2018, 2019, Ashley, 2019, Elmiger, 2015, Greco, 2019, Viennot, 2017). There exists little research on the semantics of these language changes and the changes they induce. This thesis aims to investigate this side of the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*. An analysis of these phenomena thus raises the question: *How do gender-fair language strategies affect the French Language?* In this present thesis I address this question from the assumption that the coexistence of the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre* arises from a difference between them that surpasses their morphosyntactic features. I am examining these linguistic changes with a semantic approach, relating them to societal ones through their meaning. In order to provide a complete insight into the societally motivated language changes at hand the above introduced research question is answered by investigating a number of sub questions.

- i. What are the differences (and similarities) between the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*?

This first question is addressed in chapter 1 of this thesis, where I give a detailed overview of both gender-fair language strategies. In a chronologic manner I will present the evolution of the French language leading to these two linguistic phenomena. This chapter also provides a

direct comparison of the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre* to highlight the observed differences and similarities.

- ii. How do the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre* affect pronominal French grammar?

This second question is answered in the second chapter. In this chapter I am taking a closer look at the grammatical gender system in French and by the means of the neo-pronouns *iel/iels* and *ael/aels*, resulting from the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre* respectively, highlighting the changes they introduce in pronominal grammar.

- iii. What can be observed about the usage of neo-pronouns and their referents?

This third question is the subject of the third chapter of this thesis. I am conducting a corpus analysis of multiple corpora. In a first section I am analysing a corpus created from Google search results of the neo-pronouns *iel/iels* and *ael/aels*. In a second section I am analysing a corpus constituted of tweets containing these neo-pronouns.

- iv. How can we model the pronominal grammars of Inclusive and Neutral French?

This final research question is answered in the chapters 4 and 5. Based on the analysis of the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre* and their effects on the grammatical gender system presented in the first and second chapters and the collected data of the previous chapter I am turning to the changes observed in pronominal French grammar. Within the DRT framework and by taking a presuppositional approach to (neo-)pronouns I am modelling the semantics and interpretation of the neo-pronouns at hand in chapter 4 and expanding this model to account for relevant extra-linguistic information, following Hunter (2013) in chapter 5.

1. Setting the Scene: Gender-Fair Language Strategies in French

The theory presented in this thesis treats two current linguistic phenomena observed in Modern French: the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*. The following chapter focuses on the development and presentation of these two linguistic strategies and aims to answer the first research question: What are the differences (and similarities) between the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*? Following their chronologic evolution, I am, in a first section introducing the *Écriture Inclusive* before turning to the *Écriture Neutre* in a second section. To culminate this chapter, I am going to provide a side-by-side comparison of these two French varieties outlining their differences and similarities.

1.1. From the Feminisation of Profession Nouns to the *Écriture Inclusive*

We can place the origins of the Inclusive Language at the same time as the Feminisation movement of the 1990's in France (Moron-Puech, Saris & Bouvattier, 2020). This movement had (and has) as a goal to create feminine counterparts for profession nouns and titles that were previously only used in their masculine form. Modern French is a binary gendered language: nouns carry either feminine or masculine grammatical gender. The process of grammatical gender assignment for inanimate nouns is often claimed to arbitrary but is in actuality rooted in morphology and phonology. Based on a noun's ending speakers are often able to determine a noun's grammatical gender: for example, typically feminine suffixes are *-ion*, *-ière* or *-euse* while typically masculine suffixes are *-ant*, *-ier* or *-eur* (Lyster, 2006). Some of the typically masculine endings also interact with the phonology of the lexeme, so is *-o* typically masculine unless it follows a *s* or *ç* as in *maison* ('house_{FEM}'). Grammatical gender assignment becomes more complex when we turn to animate nouns. In these cases, the grammatical gender is inferred from the real-life referent's biological sex or gender: nouns relating to female animals or humans are thus feminine and nouns relating to male animals or humans are masculine. It is important here to add that while this statement is true for a majority of animate nouns such as *femme* ('woman_{FEM}') or *homme* ('man_{MASC}'), there are a few exceptions where the real-life referent is not necessarily agreeing with the referents gender: for example, *victime* ('victim_{FEM}') is a feminine noun regardless of its referent and the noun *personnage* ('character_{MASC}') is always masculine. A noun's gender also extends to other constituents, namely determiners, adjectives, and pronouns, through the process of agreement. Here, the controller's (i.e., the noun) features are matched by the target's (i.e., the pronoun, determiner or adjective) (Corbett, 2006), illustrated in (2).

(2)

- a. *la fille intelligente*
 the_{FEM} girl_{FEM} intelligent_{FEM}
 'the intelligent girl'
- b. *le garçon intelligent*
 the_{MASC} boy_{MASC} intelligent_{MASC}
 'the intelligent boy'

In example (2a) we can see that the head noun's (*fille* ('girl_{FEM}')) feminine grammatical gender features are being matched by the determiner and adjective: *la* ('the_{FEM}') is the feminine

definite pronoun and *intelligente* ('intelligent_{FEM}') is carries the additional *-e* that as the feminine grammatical gender marker. When we compare this to (2b) where the controller is the masculine noun *garçon* ('boy_{MASC}') we see that the determiner and adjective are masculine: *le* ('the_{MASC}') masculine form of the definite determiner and *intelligent* ('intelligent_{MASC}') is the masculine form of the adjective, recognisable by the absence of the previously mentioned suffix *-e*.

The assignment of grammatical gender in animate nouns has created some societal issues in the past. Due to the way the western, and thus French society has developed, we find ourselves in a patriarchal system, which is centred around men and thus seems to favour their representation at the expense of that of women (or other genders) (Tickner, 2001). This is also reflected in our language, as briefly mentioned in the Introduction, scholars argue that the French language underwent an externally induced process of '*Masculinisation*' (Viennot, 2017). While this development does not necessarily seem to be a conscious and collective decision it resulted in some drastic changes regarding grammatical gender in French. For example, the feminine pronoun *li* ('her_{FEM}'), the counterpart of the masculine pronoun *lui* ('him_{MASC}') disappeared and the use *accord de proximité* (agreement with the closest noun instead of the masculine noun) was discouraged (Viennot, 2017). At the end of the 20th century a counter movement against the past masculinisation emerged. Due to women previously not being allowed in the workforce, many if not most profession nouns in French were only used in their masculine forms. This changed around the Second World War, and from 1965 on French women were allowed to have their own jobs without needing the approval of their husbands. Along with this emancipation a new linguistic necessity arose, that of feminine profession nouns, as the use of the masculine forms seemed ill-fitting. A first step towards a linguistic representation was taken in 1986, with Laurent Fabius who underlined the importance of representing women in the workforce in the French vocabulary (Premier ministre 1986). Fabius' encouragement of the feminisation of profession nouns was received with heavy criticism, notably by the Académie Française (Viennot, 2017). It was only in the 1990's, under Lionel Jospin and after Édith Cresson became the first female minister of France, that this concept was publicly re-enforced. Jospin launched a new linguistic investigation, and in 1999 by Becquer et al.'s work, *Femme, j'écris ton nom*, was published. (Cerquiglini, 2018) This report presented different derivation strategies to form feminine counterparts of masculine profession nouns, some of which are illustrated in (3) below.

(3)

a. Addition of an e or a suffix change

un professeur – *une professeur-e*

a_{MASC} professor_{MASC} – a_{FEM} professor_{FEM}

a student – a student

un aut-eur – *une aut-ric-e*

a_{MASC} author_{MASC} – a_{FEM} author_{FEM}

a singer – a singer

b. Article derivation

un élève – *une élève*

a_{MASC} student_{MASC} – a_{FEM} student_{FEM}
 a student – a student

The first strategy directly affects the noun in question. As illustrated in (3a) feminine counterparts of masculine profession nouns are either formed by adding the feminine suffix *-e*, previously mentioned in example (2a). Another option is changing the suffix from a traditionally masculine coded one like *-eur* to its feminine counterpart *-ice*, as in *auteur* (‘author_{MASC}’)/*autrice* (‘author_{FEM}’).

The creation and inclusion of feminine profession nouns was accompanied by a heated public debate. The Académie Française opposed this Feminisation process, arguing that it attacked the purity of the French language, until 2019 (Académie Française, 2019). This debate resulted in the famous controversy around the epicene noun *ministre* (‘minister’). As it is a noun that does not carry any distinctive morphological gender marker and can thus be interpreted as both, feminine and masculine. Traditionally a minister would be addressed as *Monsieur le ministre* (‘Sir_{MASC} the_{MASC} minister_{MASC}’). When women started occupying these positions the title changed but not the determiner, *ministre* was considered a masculine noun. The resulting *Madame le ministre* (‘Mrs._{FEM} the_{MASC} minister_{MASC}’) raised some eyebrows, especially from the female politicians concerned and was quickly replaced by the grammatically correct *Madame la ministre* (‘Mrs._{FEM} the_{FEM} minister_{FEM}’) (Fleischmann, 1997; Viennot, 2017).

Once the feminine forms of profession nouns were (more or less) established in the French language, another question in relation to linguistic gender equality arose. Now that there are actual feminine terms, how can they be represented in the language at the same level of importance and frequency as their masculine counterparts? As previously mentioned, French has a binary grammatical gender system that differentiates between masculine and feminine features, where the dependents in a NP agree in their grammatical gender features with the head noun. This process of agreement extends to outside the DP, allowing a pronoun to also match the grammatical gender features of its referent (Corbett, 2006). The question of grammatical gender assignment for singular nouns is fairly easily solved, the majority of nouns match grammatical gender to the biological sex (or social gender) of the referent. This has been previously illustrated in (2): *fille* (‘girl_{FEM}’) is feminine whereas *garçon* (‘boy_{MASC}’) is masculine. Grammatical gender assignment becomes more complicated when turning to plural nouns., illustrated by example (4).

- (4)
- a. when talking about a group of only women
Elles sont grandes.
 They_{3P-PL-FEM} be_{3P-PL} tall_{PL-FEM}
 ‘They are tall’
- b. when talking about a group of only men
Ils sont grands.
 They_{3P-PL-MASC} be_{3P-PL} tall_{PL-MASC}

‘They are tall’

c. when talking about a group of women and men

%*Elles* *sont* *grandes*.

They_{3P-PL-FEM} be_{3P-PL} tall_{PL-FEM}

‘They are tall’

Ils *sont* *grands*.

They_{3P-PL-MASC} be_{3P-PL} tall_{PL-MASC}

‘They are tall’

Example (4) above presents three different situations affecting the speaker’s choice of grammatical gender. In the context of (4a), the choice of the feminine plural pronoun *elles* (‘they_{FEM}’) is undisputable: the speaker is referring to a group of women, therefore they use the feminine plural pronoun *elles* (‘they_{FEM}’). The situation is similar in context (4b) the speaker is referring to a group of men, and thus uses the masculine plural pronoun *ils* (‘they_{MASC}’). It is in context (4c) that difficulties arise: the speaker is referring to mixed group. The binary grammatical gender system of the French language ‘forces’ them however, to decide between the two grammatical gender categories. The solution that emerged in French is to follow the infamous statement “*le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin*” (Eng.: ‘the masculine takes over the feminine’): in a context where the grammatical gender that should be used is unclear (as in (4c)) the masculine form is considered correct. While opting for the feminine plural pronoun in a situation where there is (grammatical) gender ambiguity or multiplicity is not grammatically incorrect, its use is discouraged by language instructors and the Académie Française (Académie Française, 2014). This practice, which has been argued to be of artificial origin (Viennot, 2017) is an important aspect that can be considered to be the main reason of the French language’s reputation as sexist. The use of the masculine in contexts like (4c) is considered to be different from the traditional masculine, it is generic.

The concept of the ‘generic masculine’, introduced earlier in this thesis, is argued to be a neutralised version of the masculine: it claims to be stripped from any masculine or real-world male connotations. Nevertheless, this view has been contested and the previously mentioned psycholinguistic studies show that speakers do in fact create associations between grammatical and social gender. The studies conducted by Brauer & Landry (2008) and Sato et al. (2008) indicate the presence of a male bias in referent perception when the generic masculine is used, meaning that, even if the use of the masculine forms in these context claims be neutral and thus to refer to all genders, speakers still tend to interpret it as referring to only men. Other studies also strengthen the assertion that grammatical gender has an influence on perception. In their research, Phillips & Boroditsky (2003) found that participants saw a higher similarity in object-human pairs when they shared the same grammatical gender and Boroditsky et al. (2003) show that when asked to provide matching adjectives for an object these were often adjectives rated as matching the objects grammatical gender category, and in line with stereotypes associated with these categories. This influence of grammatical gender on the perception of inanimate nouns can be extended to animate nouns and pronouns. We can assume that the connotations concerning gender introduced by the use of a certain grammatical

gender affects how people interpret and perceive a referent. In this sense can it be argued that the ‘generic masculine’ does not fulfil its role as neutral successfully. Speakers and hearers do not seem able to detach the masculine from its male connotations. In addition to its debatable neutral connotations, the use of the generic masculine raises another issue: that of linguistic inclusivity. Speakers not only have to choose one of the categories, thus discarding the other, they have also been taught to favour one category over the other, namely the masculine. This practice does not only linguistically discriminate the feminine grammatical gender but is perceived as rendering women (linguistically) invisible. This gap is what the *Écriture Inclusive* aims to fill. According to Alpheratz (2018), the *Écriture Inclusive* can be defined as “*the totality of language processes [...], generally founded on the notion of gender and particularly on the rejection of a hierarchy between the symbolic and social representations associated to the grammatical genders, these variations having as goal to include et visualize all genders in language just as in thought*”¹ (Alpheratz, 2018 as cited in Alpheratz, 2018, p.3).

So far, two motives for linguistic inclusivity can be established: the first one is linguistic representation (through the above-mentioned process of Feminisation) and the second one is linguistic visibility. Linguistic representation aims to give space for everyone to be represented in language, an example of this rhetoric is the Feminisation movement. This process can be considered, to a certain extent, as successful: the creation of feminine profession nouns underlines the presence of women in the workforce as independent humans. They are now explicitly and visibly a part of the French language. Linguistic visibility naturally follows representation. Now that feminine counterparts are much more common, the goal is to create a space to use these terms. The use of the generic masculine does not allow for these feminine terms to achieve the same linguistic visibility as their masculine counterparts (Moron-Puech, Saris & Bouvattier, 2020). The aim of the *Écriture Inclusive* is to linguistically represent the two (grammatical) genders in a context where they are both present. It attempts to create a way of writing (and by extension speaking) that allows the explicit inclusion of men and women. This is done through the inclusion of both grammatical gender markers, separated by a diacritic, first introduced in example (1), and re-stated in (5).

- (5)
- a. *fatigué.e*
tired_{MASC.FEM}
 - b. *gentil.le*
nice_{MASC.FEM}
 - c. *intéressant.e*
interesting_{MASC.FEM}
 - d. *curieux.se*
curious_{MASC.FEM}

¹ Original quote: „*l’ensemble des processus langagiers qui s’écartent du français standard, fondés en général sur la notion de genre, et en particulier sur le rejet d’une hiérarchie entre les représentations symboliques et sociales associées aux genres grammaticaux, ces variations ayant pour objectif d’inclure et de visibiliser tous les genres dans la langue comme dans la pensée*”

In the example above we see that the combines the masculine forms, *gentil* (‘nice_{MASC}’) (5b) *intéressant* (‘interesting_{MASC}’) (5c) and *curieux* (‘curious_{MASC}’) (5d) with the feminine gender markers *-le* (5a), *-e* (5c) and *-se* (5d), separated by a period. This results in the explicit inclusion of both (grammatical) genders in the written language, allowing to address everyone in a group. With a greeting like *Cher.ère Employé.e* (‘Dear_{MASC.FEM} Employee_{MASC.FEM}’), both, men and women are addressed and (linguistically) represented.

An important note here is that there is little consensus on the ‘correct’ way of writing *en inclusif* (eng. ‘in inclusive’). In France, the in 2013 founded *Haut Conseil à l’Égalité*, published a guide presenting the acceptable way of writing in 2015 and in Belgium the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* published a similar guide in 2020. Taking a look at the presented strategies, we notice that while they have much in common, there are differences on multiple linguistic levels: morphological, syntactic, in terms of the diacritics used and regarding the social aspect. The two mentioned writing guides encourage the use of epicene nouns, as they are inherently neutral and do not explicitly state the referents gender. Further, the syntactic inclusive language strategies encourage the use of feminine forms in agreement with titles and articles as well as the *accord de proximité* and the *double flexion* (‘double call’). The main differences lie in the domain of diacritics and social implications of the *Écriture Inclusive*. This means that we come across different ways, some of which are illustrated in (6):

(6)

- a. Grammatical gender markers separated by a period:

Tou.te.s les membres de l’
 All_{MASC.FEM.PL} the_{PL} member_{PL} of the_{ART-DEF-FEM-SG}
association sont invité.e.s
 association_{FEM-SG} be_{3P-PL} invited_{MASC.FEM-SG}

‘All association members are invited.’ (as cited in Alpheratz, 2018, p.9)

- b. Grammatical gender markers separated by a point:

A partir de quinze minutes de retard
 At leave_{INF} of fifteen minutes_{FEM-PL} of lateness_{MASC-SG}
plus aucun.e élève n’ aura accès
 more_{NOMASC.FEM-SG} student_{SG} NEG have_{3P-SG} access_{MASC-SG}
à la salle d’ examen
 to the_{FEM-SG} room_{FEM-SG} of exam_{MASC-SG}

‘Students do not have access to the exam room if they are late by more than fifteen minutes’ (as cited in Alpheratz, 2018, p.9)

- c. Grammatical gender markers separated by a dash:

Les plus grand-e-s professionnelles
 The_{PL} plus big_{MASC-FEM-SG} professional_{NEUT-PL}
du secteur de l’ édition se
 from sector_{MASC-SG} of the_{FEM-SG} edition_{FEM-SG} themselves
déclarent préoccupé-e-s par ce problème.
 Declare_{3P-PL} preoccupied_{MASC-FEM-PL} by this_{MASC-SG} problem_{MASC-SG}

‘The biggest professionals from the publishing sector declared themselves preoccupied by this problem.’ (as cited in Alpheratz, 2018, p.9)

- d. Feminine grammatical gender marker between parentheses :

Bonsoir à tou(te)s

Good evening to everyone_{MASC(FEM)-PL}

‘Good evening everyone’ (Claire Grover, courriel sur liste EELV, 01/01/2017, as cited in Alpheratz, 2018, p.9)

- e. Capitalization of the feminine grammatical gender marker:

UniEs par l’ écologie

United_{MASC(FEM)-PL} by the_{MASC-SG} ecology_{FEM-SG}

‘United by ecology’ (Michel Sourrouille, courriel sur liste EELV, 05/01/2017, as cited in Alpheratz, 2018, p.10)

The form promoted by these writing guides by the French and Belgian governments separates the different grammatical gender markers with a period (6a) or a *point médian* (6b). This aspect underlines the progress the *Écriture Inclusive* has undergone it seems to have been widely adopted and these writing guides work out the practical consequences of the new norms. An interesting addition are the examples (6d) and (6e). Here the diacritics used are parenthesis around the feminine forms, a rather questionable practice, as it can be interpreted as putting women between parenthesis, in a way going against the motive of linguistic visibility. Example (6e) uses capital letters to differentiate the forms: the feminine suffix *-e* is capitalized, which can be read to it being only read as feminine instead of inclusive.

Similar to the Feminisation, the *Écriture Inclusive* has been part of a heated public debate reaching its height in autumn 2017 (Moron-Puech, Saris & Bouvattier, 2020), when a first school manual applying the inclusive language strategies, was published. The Académie Française issued a statement that they are, opposing this linguistic development, as they consider it to be a threat to the French language (Académie française, 2017). Unfortunately, the controversy of the use of the *Écriture Inclusive* has not yet been resolved. While it can be found in many different contexts, from online dating platforms to public communications by companies or political parties and figures (e.g.: Tinder, n.d.; Parti communiste français, 2021; Université Libre de Bruxelles, 2022) it is still a controversial topic, especially in France. The latest development regarding the use of the *Écriture Inclusive* happened in the French political sphere. The Ministry of Education passed a law prohibiting the use of the *Écriture Inclusive* in the French education system (Ministère de l’Éducation Nationale de la Jeunesse et des Sports, 2020). This black-or-white approach towards the *Écriture Inclusive* is not found in other francophone countries: while there have been political debates around the *Écriture Inclusive* in Belgium no political measures have been taken for or against it, which also is the case in Canada (Moron-Puech, Saris & Bouvattier, 2020). Nevertheless, it is important to highlight that this law seems to be in direct contradiction with speaker behaviour (e.g. École nationale supérieure des beaux-arts de Lyon, 2022): in October 2021, the online version of the well-used French dictionary *Le Robert* officially added the third-person neo-pronouns *iel* to their repertoire, defining it as a “Third person personal singular (iel) or plural (iels) pronoun, used to designate a person no matter their gender” (Le Robert, 2021). This pronoun allows speakers

to avoid the generic masculine in sentences such as *Chacun fait ce qu'iel veut* (Eng. ‘Everyone does what they want’) instead of *Chacun fait ce qu'il veut* (Eng. ‘Everyone does what he wants’). *Iel(s)* can be seen as an extension of the *Écriture Inclusive*, the use of diacritic does not work in the French pronoun system, in order to find a solution to this problem speakers turned to word formation. In their communication following the public uproar of this decision, they justify their decision by the increasing frequency of use of this term (Bimbenet, 2021). A study by Burnett (2018), shows that active criticism and opposition is mainly found in a politically motivated context agenda as most of the opposants are from a more conservative or right-wing political background whose views on inclusivity and gender equality are more geared towards their agenda. The speakers themselves, on the other hand, do not necessarily reject these changes on such a big scale.

Iel is a noteworthy addition to the French vocabulary, it provides a solution to the previously mentioned difficulty of choosing one grammatical gender over the other which has traditionally been solved by adopting the generic masculine strategy. Taking a closer look at these neo-pronouns we see that they are combination of the traditional, binary third-person pronouns *elle* (‘*she*_{FEM}’) and *il* (‘*him*_{MASC}’). Due to this aspect, I consider them as part of the *Écriture Inclusive*, but the neutral feature they are introducing could also be considered as an argument for them forming part of another, more recent linguistic phenomenon: the *Écriture Neutre* (Neutral Writing). The next section gives a detailed presentation of this phenomenon.

1.2. The *Écriture Neutre*

The *Écriture Inclusive*’s goal is to favour linguistic representation and visibility of women and people using the feminine forms of pronouns, nouns and adjectives. This allows the French language to take a step towards linguistic inclusivity, but it is still embedded in a binary world view. The explicitly mentioned genders are men and women is considered by some, as excluding or at least invisibilising humans whose gender identity lies outside of the binary categories (Alpheratz, 2017, 2018c; Ashley, 2019). Agender, nonbinary or genderqueer² people, often do not see themselves included by this practice. In this sense, the *Écriture Inclusive* fails to meet its goal of inclusivity as it is not ‘complete’. In order to combat this ‘incomplete inclusivity’, another, more recent, linguistic phenomenon emerged: the *Écriture Neutre* (Neutral Writing).

In a way the emergence of the *Écriture Neutre* can be considered as similar to that of the *Écriture Inclusive*. Both of these linguistic phenomena are rooted in the societal process of gender inclusivity and awareness. As in the *Écriture Inclusive*, we see that it stems from the need to reflect societal changes in language. As mentioned in the introduction, gender identities outside the binary categories of woman and man, are not a new concept, especially in non-western societies (Young, 2019). These are however a minority which explains the small public knowledge about them. In recent years this started to change, women’s emancipation and the

² **Agender:** “an agender person doesn’t identify with a gender at all. This can manifest in a number of different ways, from not having a gender or rejecting the idea of labelling oneself, to a wholesale rejection of the entire institution of gender.” (Young, 2019, p.94)

Genderqueer: term referring to “people whose identities lie outside ‘man’ and ‘woman’” (Young, 2019, p.17)

growing acceptance and inclusion of queer identities led to more and more people coming out as non-binary, agender or genderqueer and affirming their identities proudly and publicly. With the works of scholars like West & Zimmerman (1987), Butler (1999) and Fenstermaker & West (2002), the understanding of gender changed and distanced itself from the biological sex. This removed the biological binary dichotomy of male and female placed upon it and made space for a broader understanding, rooted in what Butler considers ‘improvised performance’ (1999). Delving deeper into the differences of sex and gender and different gender identity exceeds the scope of this thesis. I will be focusing on non-binary and agender gender identities as these seem to not only create societal issues but, in many languages, also linguistic ones.

In the case of French, this linguistic problem stems from the language’s binary grammatical gender system. The two categories being feminine and masculine, they are, as mentioned in 1.1., intertwined with connotations of the matching social gender and biological sex. This means that in Modern French there is no way to gender someone or something in a gender-neutral way. There is nowadays, no neutral grammatical gender category in French. The *Écriture Neutre* aims to solve this problem. Speakers of this variety of French argue that this category is to be used in a context where “*a grammatical gender associates grammatical markers to a referent who has an impersonal gender structure, is agender, of communal gender, whose gender is unknown or nonbinary.*”³ (Alpheratz 2018c, p. 3). The *Écriture Neutre*’s most famous representatives are probably neo-pronouns, the most famous one being the earlier introduced *iel*, but there are a number of other neo-pronouns that can be found, such as *ael*, *al*, *ol*, *ul*, or *yl* to name a few (Greco, 2019). An important note regarding the use of neo-pronouns is its lack of standardization, dissimilar to the *Écriture Inclusive* there are no ‘official’ writing guides (by governmental or educational institutions): speakers chose a neo-pronoun they consider best fitting for themselves, which results in this long list of options.

As mentioned above the process of standardization of the *Écriture Neutre* is still ongoing. It would however be incorrect to claim that there are no guidelines at all. The linguist Alpheratz is the first to officially record different strategies used by French speakers in order to achieve gender-neutrality in French (Alpheratz, 2017). Unfortunately, the literature about the *Écriture Neutre* in French remains scarce, it seems nonetheless, safe to claim that the origin of the *Écriture Neutre* lies in an attempt to provide a language that is not only more inclusive of its speakers (Elmiger, 2015) but also less binary (Alpheratz, 2017; Ashley, 2019). Furthermore, the *Écriture Neutre* is a very community specific phenomenon, its emergence can undoubtedly be placed in the francophone queer community. Queer collectives such as the Belgian collective ByeByeBinary actively work on the creation, documentation and spread of neutral terms in French. (ByeByeBinary, n.d.; ClubMæd, 2019). Some examples of neutral forms in French next to its traditional counterparts, are presented in example (7).

(7)

a. 3rd person singular pronouns: *al* (Ashley, 2019, p.11) - *elle* (‘she_{FEM}’)/*il* (‘he_{MASC}’)

³ Original quote: “*le genre grammatical neutre est un genre grammatical qui associe des marques grammaticales à un référent de genre en structure impersonnelle, agenre, de genre commun, inconnu ou non-binaire.*”

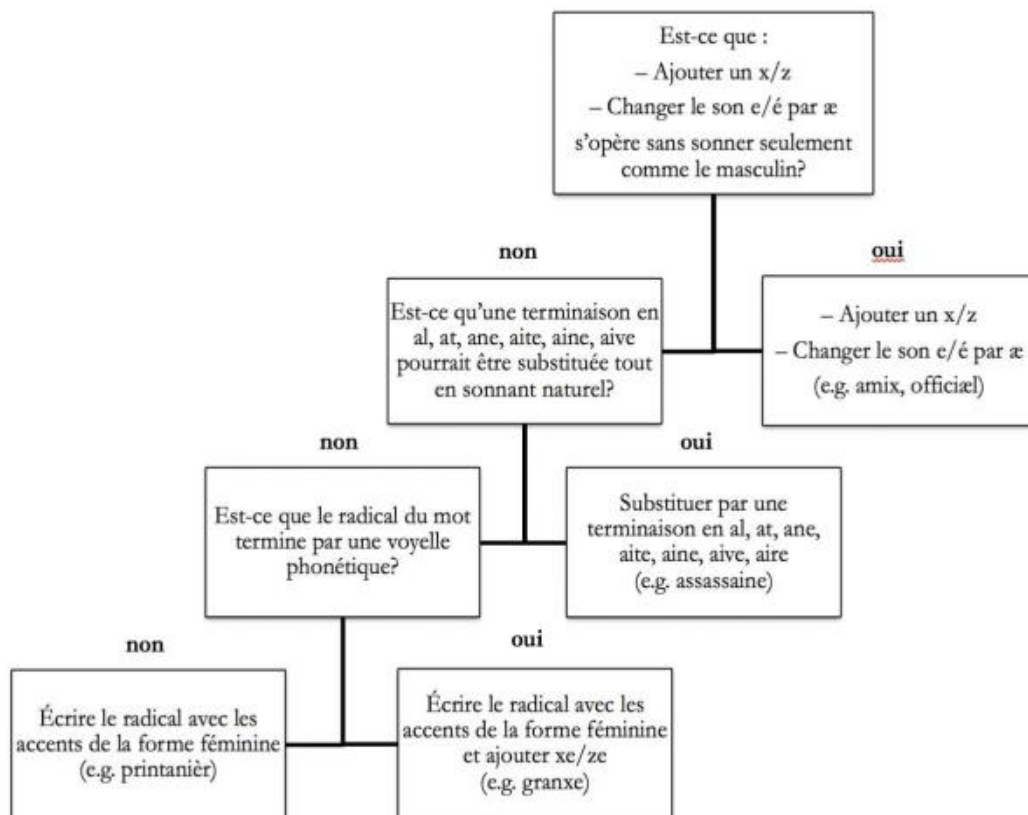
- b. Singular definite articles: *lu* (Ashley, 2019, p.11) - *la* ('the_{FEM}')/*le* ('the_{MASC}')
- c. Singular indefinite article: *an* (Ashley, 2019, p.11) - *une* ('a_{FEM}')/*un* ('a_{MASC}')
- d. 1st person singular possessive pronoun: *mu* (Ashley, 2019, p.11) - *ma* ('my_{FEM}')/*mon* ('my_{MASC}')
- e. Past participle of verbs: *aimæ*; *finix* (Ashley, 2019, p.11) - *aimée* ('loved_{FEM}')/*aimé* ('loved_{MASC}'); *finie* ('finished_{FEM}')/*fini* ('finished_{MASC}')
- f. Adjectives: *béal* (Ashley, 2019, p.12) - *belle* ('beautiful_{FEM}')/*beau* ('beautiful_{MASC}')
- g. Nouns: *docteurx* (Ashley, 2019, p.13) - *docteure* ('doctor_{FEM}')/*docteur* ('doctor_{MASC}')

When we compare the examples above with their traditional, binary counterparts we notice the avoidance of a morphological resemblance with these forms, unlike *iel* or *ielle*, the neo-pronoun *al* in (7a) bears only the 'necessary' resemblance with the traditional pronouns *elle* ('she_{FEM}') and *il* ('he_{MASC}'). The determiners in (7b), (7c) and (7d) also take the typical morphemes associated with their category (-*n* for the indefinite articles, as found in *une* ('a_{FEM}') and *un* ('a_{MASC}') and; *l-* for the definite articles, as found in *la* ('the_{FEM}') and *le* ('the_{MASC}'); *m-* for the 1st person singular possessive pronoun, as found in *ma* ('my_{FEM}') and *mon* ('my_{MASC}')) to allow them to be associated with them but deviate from these forms by combining it with new morphemes: *a-* for the indefinite neutral article (7b), *-u* for the definite neutral article (7c) and the possessive pronoun (7d). The process is similar for nouns, adjectives and the past participle of verbs where the stem remains unchanged, but the suffix added is neither traditionally masculine nor feminine. In (7e) we see that for the past participle of the verb *finir* ('to finish'), the suffix is *-x*, differing from the traditional forms *finie* ('finished_{FEM}') and *fini* ('finished_{MASC}') and for *aimer* ('to love') the added suffix is *-æ* distancing itself from the traditional forms *aimée* ('loved_{FEM}') and *aimé* ('loved_{MASC}'). This can also be seen in (7f) and (7g): the neutral counterpart of *belle* ('beautiful_{FEM}')/*beau* ('beautiful_{MASC}') keeps the morpheme *b-* the both traditional forms have in common but adds the suffix *-éal* and the neutral counterpart for *docteure* ('doctor_{FEM}') and *docteur* ('doctor_{MASC}') uses the suffix *-x* to form *docteurx*.

An important aspect of the *Écriture Neutre* is its variety, similar to the *Écriture Inclusive* there is currently very little to no consensus about how these forms are created. When we take a look at writing guides for the *Écriture Neutre*, we are often presented with a multitude of options for the same word: for example, *assistanx* or *assistanz* for *assistante* ('assistant_{FEM}')/*assistant* ('assistant_{MASC}') or *curataire* or *curatorice* for *curatrice* ('curator_{FEM}')/*curateur* ('curator_{MASC}'). Alpheratz (2018c) and Ashley (2019) have each provided a guide for the process of neutral word formation, a diagram for this process is presented in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Diagram for the formation of a neutral word form (Ashley, 2019, p.14)



The diagram above shows the uncertainty that comes with the creation of the neutral, there are no clear indication for suffixes leaving much room for speaker's creativity.

The previous two sections introduced the two linguistic phenomena at the centre of this thesis. The co-existence of these two, rather similar, processes allow me to assume that there exists a fundamental difference between these two, that goes beyond that of their different forms. In the following section I am presenting a side-by-side comparison between the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*, as a first step in researching their differences.

1.3. Comparing Inclusive Versus Neutral French

At a first glance, the goals of the *Écriture Inclusive* and *Écriture Neutre* seem to be rather similar: they aim to create a more gender-fair French language. This common goal is of importance when analysing the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*. It seems telling that the reasoning behind these two linguistic phenomena are quite similar but their execution so different. Besides their morphological differences there seem to be underlying differences in meaning and connotations between the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*. In order to compare and distinguish between these two forms multiple aspects from the domain of morphology as well as semantics and pragmatics have to be considered. The three elements that come into play when analysing the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre* are: origin,

motivation, and form. The following section delves deeper into these differences (and similarities) in an attempt to formalise them. Table 1 below summarises the previously introduced characteristics of the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*, opposing them to one another. This allows us to point out the subtle, nevertheless crucial differences between these two phenomena and for a better understanding of their meanings. A comparison of *Écriture Inclusive* and *Écriture Neutre* can be split into four different categories: motivation, form, pragmatics, and distribution. To understand the motivations behind these varieties we will take a look at the origins of these forms. ‘Form’ refers to the morphological makeup of these forms and ‘pragmatics’ deals with the intention behind using these varieties. The final category ‘distribution’ is concerned with the use of these forms by French speakers. Table 1 below presents a brief overview of the comparison between *Écriture Inclusive* and *Écriture Neutre* based on these categories.

Table 1

Comparison Écriture Inclusive and Écriture Neutre

| | <i>Écriture Inclusive</i> | <i>Écriture Neutre</i> |
|--------------|---|---|
| Motivation | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Feminist community - Extension of Feminisation movement - Combat social gender hierarchy and sexism | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - LGBTQ+ community - Combat gender binary |
| Form | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Presence both of grammatical gender markers, more or less distinguishable - Contractions | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Neo-suffixes, neither masculine nor feminine |
| Distribution | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Found in most mainstream media and public communications - Mainly written | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Very specific to the francophone queer and feminist community - Mainly written |
| Pragmatics | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Used in a context with multiple genders - Enhance linguistic visibility by referring to everyone in the group - Not favour one gender over the other - Diacritic = disjunction | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Used in a context with no gender, unknown gender or where gender is irrelevant |

Motivation. A first opposition can be found when looking at the origin, or motivation of these two linguistic phenomena. This aspect of the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre* is deeply intertwined with society. Both phenomena are born out of the societal effort to create a

more equal and inclusive society. This adds another dimension to the semantic and pragmatic analysis of these forms as it seems essential to place them into their respective contexts and as well as focus on not only interpretation but also production. As introduced in the previous section 1.1, the *Écriture Inclusive* can be considered as an extension of the Feminisation movement of the early 2000. It is anchored in the binary gender system of French language and society but tries to create a fairer, more equal use of gendered terms. Its goal is to favour linguistic visibility by including those who have been, deliberately or not, pushed in the background. In this sense we can see the *Écriture Inclusive* as a linguistic translation of the feminist goal to eradicate sexism and patriarchal structures from our society on all levels. It evolved from the social changes in terms of women's emancipation with the purpose to put a new forming reality into words. The *Écriture Inclusive* takes the battle for gender equality from the societal, structural level into that of language and the lexicon.

The *Écriture Neutre* on the other hand originated in a community that actively rejects these binary gender distinctions: the LGBTQ+⁴ community. While the *Écriture Inclusive*'s motivation can be interpreted as mainly feminist (the goal is linguistic equality between the feminine and the masculine, men, and women), the *Écriture Neutre*'s motivation is not directed towards reconciling the masculine and feminine but to provide an option beyond that. This results in the creation of a new more personal interpretation of gender. The motivation behind this variety of French is not to only combat the existing, sexist hierarchy between genders, but to dismantle the binary structure it is anchored in. It can be seen, to some extent, as the extension of the *Écriture Inclusive*. Just as this phenomenon, the *Écriture Neutre* is a linguistic expression of societal change or fight for change. I would argue that it is a logical continuation of women's emancipation in the fight for equal rights for all genders. The *Écriture Neutre* thus does not focus on linguistic visibility of feminine forms but of forms that are no longer tied up with these binary categories.

To put it succinctly, although both of these strategies for gender-fair language originate from a feminist and activist background, the motivations behind them diverge from one to another. The *Écriture Inclusive*, just as the *Écriture Neutre* are both grounded in the fight for recognition, visibility, and equality, but are not directed towards the same group: the *Écriture Inclusive* remains attached to a binary understanding and distinction between genders, highlighting the visibility of the feminine. Meanwhile the *Écriture Neutre* attempts to rise above the binary and provide visibility to those who do not find themselves represented in either of these categories.

Form. The previously mentioned distinction between the dissimilar motivations of the *Écriture Inclusive* and *Écriture Neutre* is also reflected in the respective forms of these varieties. The different morphological makeups constitute the maybe most flagrant difference and play an important role as they underline the motivation behind their use. Following the idea of linguistic representation and visibility, the *Écriture Inclusive* includes both, the masculine and the feminine, grammatical gender markers. This practice is in opposition with the *Écriture*

⁴ **LGBTQ**: acronym for Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender and Queer or Questioning (The Center, 2022)

Neutre, which removes explicit grammatical gender markers in favour of new suffixes, introducing thus the aimed for neutrality. The latter does thus not advocate for linguistic visibility of the feminine but eradication of the masculine and the feminine. To illustrate these differences in form, I re-introduce examples (1) in example (8) below.

- (8)
- a. *fatigué.e*
tired_[MASC.FEM]
 - b. *fatiguæ*
tired_[NEUT]

In the (8a) example above we recognize, in the inclusive form of the adjective, again the two forms of the grammatical gender markers: *fatiguée* ('tired_{FEM}') for the feminine and *fatigué* ('tired_{MASC}') for the masculine. The neutral form of this same adjective (8b) does not resort to any of the traditional gender makers but adds the suffix *-æ* to *fatigu-*, the root of the adjective.

The relevance of a form for meaning is no new concept in the field of (compositional) semantics, a word form provides the speaker and hearer with a symbol to which meaning is being assign to. The *Écriture Inclusive* contains a diacritic that separates the stem and masculine form from the feminine form so that both are easily distinguishable. This diacritic introduces a disjunction, allowing the forms like *fatigué.e* ('tired_{INCL}') to be read as 'feminine or masculine'. For the *Écriture Neutre* we do not see such a disjunction, the interpretation of the neutral form *fatiguæ* ('tired_{NEUT}') is here closer to 'neither feminine nor masculine'.

At this point, a crucial note on the presented morphological distinctions between the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre* has to be made. The morphological boundary of the inclusive and neutral, even though they are implementing different goals in a highly distinct manner, seems rather blurry. We often find forms that are introduced to us as neutral but that are, at a closer look, contractions, for example *performeureuse* in which morphological make up we can recognise the feminine form *performeuse* ('performer_{FEM}') and the masculine form *performeur* ('performer_{MASC}'). In their guide, ClubMaed (2019) dedicates a separate section to these formations, while others consider them as neutral forms (Ashley, 2019). I argue that these forms are part of the *Écriture Inclusive*, as they do not follow the previously mentioned requirement of an absence of explicit gender markers that are traditionally feminine or masculine. In this sense, even if these forms are missing the typical diacritic associated with the *Écriture Inclusive*, they still belong to this category. Furthermore, the previously introduced neo-pronoun *iel* is often considered to form part of the *Écriture Neutre*, I however, consider it as part of the *Écriture Inclusive*. This argumentation is based on the understanding of neutral as not presenting any markers that are explicitly feminine or masculine (Alpheratz, 2018c). Example (9) presents a number of these terms from different grammatical categories:

- (9)
- a. definite article: *lea, lae*
 - b. 1st person possessive pronoun : *maon*

c. adjectives : *belleau*

It is interesting to note here that these forms also present a solution for another problem in relation to the use of the *Écriture Inclusive*: its pronounceability. Pronouncing the diacritics is impossible and the double call is rather wordy, therefore these forms allow for an easier pronunciation. This aspect of the *Écriture Neutre* can be seen as a benefit helping its future development and is directly related to the following point: their distribution.

Distribution. Both, *Écriture Inclusive* and *Écriture Neutre*, are predominantly written forms. As previously noted the *Écriture Inclusive* can nowadays be found in many if not most medias, ranging from social media posts (10a) and newspaper articles (10b) to political or professional communications (10c) and educational settings (10d). The *Écriture Neutre* seems to be significantly less common, and rarely leaves the queer French sphere (11).

(10)

a. Social media post

Quelle meilleure façon de traiter du langage qu'Écriture Neutre recevant

What better manner of treat of language than in receiving

celle•ux qui le repensent ?

those_{INCL-PL} who the rethink

What better way of treating language than receiving those who re-think it?

(SOMA [soma.marseille], 2022)

b. Newspaper article

[...] a gagné le statut de franchise culte

has reached the status of franchise cult

pour plusieurs générations de Québécois.es.

for multiple generations of Quebecois_{INCL-PL}

[...] as reached the status of a cult franchise for many generations of (Cazzaniga, 2022)

c. Political communications

[...] nous sommes convaincu•e•s que ce sont

we are convinced_{INCL-PL} that it be_{3P-LP}

les opprimé•es et les exploité•es qui jouent

the oppressed_{INCL-PL} and the exploited_{INCL-PL} who play

un rôle central dans la transformation sociale

a role central in the transformation social

[...] we are convinced that it is those who are oppressed and exploited that play

a central role in social transformation [...] (Union Communiste Libertaire Bruxelles, 2021)

d. Educational context

Les étudiant•es ambassadeur•rices de l' UCLouvain

The_{PL} students_{INCL-PL} ambassadors_{INCL-PL} of the UCLouvain

t' expliquent l' université sur Twitch !

you explain_{3P-PL} the univeristy on Twitch

UCLouvain's student ambassadors explain the university to you on Twitch!
(Université Catholique de Louvain, 2022)

(11)

Comment on a queer collective's Instagram post

Qu' est-ce que tu- vous appelez radical ?

What is it that YOU_{INFORMAL} YOU_{FORMAL} call radical_{NEUT-SG}

What do you call radical ? (stephanie_eleonore_kohler, 2021)

Pragmatics. The choice to use the *Écriture Inclusive* is arguably a conscious one. Similar to the notion of politeness and formality, standardized in Modern French, the speaker assesses the situation and adapts their language accordingly. The forms proposed by this variety of French do not only require a linguistic de- and re-construction of the French language system but as argued by Alpheratz (2018b), a number of cognitive-discursive acts that play an import role in the use of the *Écriture Inclusive*. Speakers of inclusive French are thus assumed to undergo the following steps (in the provided order) before their utterances. These cognitive-discursive acts preceding the production of the *Écriture Inclusive* (Alpheratz, 2018b, p. 7)⁵ are the following:

- i. concern for the right word and respect for gender identities, refusal of the hierarchy between symbolic and social representations instituted by the generic use of the masculine grammatical gender
- ii. awareness of performing a political act motivated by the hope of having an influence through one's linguistic choices
- iii. assessment of the possible lexical or grammatical unit, taking the principle of inclusivity into account
- iv. judgement of the linguistic and extralinguistic parameters of the unit under consideration
- v. neological creativity and/or epilinguistic commentary if standard French does not present an acceptable unit

The acts presented above, are influenced by the weight words and their connotations carry and the speaker's aspiration to avoid those that could be perceived as disrespectful or hurtful. In step (i) speakers consider who they are talking to and about, the question that needs to be answered here is "What genders are represented in this situation and how can they all be made visible linguistically?". The following step (ii) requires the speaker to be aware that they are not just simply carrying out a speech act like any other, but that this one is based in a certain political and socially conscious background. Using the terms provided by the *Écriture Inclusive* is by far not universally recognised or even well seen, and some of the encouraged strategies (such as the previously mentioned *accord de proximité*) are often considered of questionable

⁵ Original quote: « 1/ souci du mot juste et du respect des identités de genre, refus de la hiérarchisation entre les représentations symboliques et sociales instituée par l'emploi générique du genre grammatical masculin; 2/ conscience d'effectuer un acte politique motivée par l'espoir d'avoir une influence par ses choix linguistiques ; 3/ évaluation de l'unité lexicale ou grammaticale possible à l'aune du principe d'inclusivité; 4/ jugement sur les paramètres linguistiques et extralinguistiques de l'unité examinée; 5/ créativité néologique et/ou commentaire épilinguistique si le français standard ne présente pas d'unité recevable » (Alpheratz, 2018b, p. 7)

grammaticality. Further, the use of the *Écriture Inclusive* comes hand in hand with the fight for gender equality, by using an inclusive word-forms the speaker's intention is to underline the presence of those who would have been pushed in the background, namely women. While the first two steps are conducted on a personal level, as they require speaker reflection, with step (iii) we enter the domain of linguistics. Speakers then turn to the lexeme they intend to use and consider it under the light of the conclusions obtained in the two previous steps. The speaker examines possible inclusive language strategies they can apply to the word (iii) and the specifics of said word, from a linguistic point of view (i.e., morphology and syntax) as well as extralinguistic (i.e., in what context will the word be used?) (iv). Finally, the speaker turns to the implementation, where they have to display a certain amount of linguistic creativity in order to use the term that is most fitting in this specific context (v).

I argue that these cognitive-discursive acts, after some slight modifications, also hold true for the *Écriture Neutre*. Using neutral neo-word forms is a conscious act, just as is the use of the *Écriture Inclusive*. The thought process that precedes the utterance of a neutral term presupposes similar, if not the same, conscious acts that we can find in the *Écriture Inclusive*. The modified version of these cognitive-discursive acts (modified from Alpheratz, 2018b, p. 7) thus are:

- i. concern for the right word and respect for gender identities
- ii. awareness of performing a political act motivated by the hope of having an influence through one's linguistic choices
- iii. assessment of the possible lexical or grammatical unit taking gender identity as well as relevancy into account
- iv. judgement of the linguistic and extralinguistic parameters of the unit under consideration
- v. neological creativity and/or epilinguistic commentary if standard French does not present an acceptable unit

Speakers need to show a concern for using the right term that respects a person's gender identity. For the *Écriture Neutre* there is not the refusal of the gender hierarchy as such, but rather a refusal of a binary distinction between the genders and the respect for gender identities outside this gender binary (i). Just as, if not even more than, the *Écriture Inclusive*, the use of the *Écriture Neutre* is a political act carried out with the desire to have an impact through the linguistic choice made (ii). This aspect is arguably essential for the use of the *Écriture Neutre*. Gender identities that go beyond that of woman or man are not well known and even less accepted in many western cultures, they therefore rarely have words to assert their existence. By creating terms and word forms that explicitly refer to those who have been 'nameless' not only spreads the knowledge of such identities but also anchors them in language and thus society. The pragmatic aspects of these cognitive-discursive acts remain the same as for the *Écriture Inclusive*, with the sole exception that when the lexeme is assessed it is not under the light of inclusivity as a goal but under that of neutrality (iii). The speaker does not aim to create and use a term that will (explicitly) include more than one (grammatical) gender but to create a term that is entirely removed from the gender binary.

The meaning of a neutral or inclusive word form directly aligns with the motivation behind them. The speaker makes the choice concerning the referent, in this case about the word form to be used. Based on Alpheratz (2018b) analysis of the production of these linguistic strategies it appears that extra-linguistic information is relevant when interpreting these word forms. The cognitive-discursive acts that speakers undergo account before the production of the utterance including the *Écriture Inclusive* or the *Écriture Neutre*, present information for the hearer about the speaker's world-view as well as the referent. Taking origin and intentions of these linguistic strategies into account, the hearer can interpret their forms as referring to a group of people with different genders, (the most common use of the *Écriture Inclusive*) or to a singular person that is either nonbinary or whose gender is unknown or irrelevant (common use of the *Écriture Neutre*).

This chapter addressed the first research question of this thesis: What are the differences (and similarities) between the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*? In section 1.1. I briefly outlined the changes in the French language and society which lied the ground for the development of the *Écriture Inclusive*. I then took a closer look at the phenomenon itself, *Écriture Inclusive* allows speakers to avoid the commitment to one gender to the detriment of the other as is the case in the generic masculine by explicitly including men and women (and other genders). In section 1.2. I presented the other phenomenon at hand: the *Écriture Neutre*. This variety's goal is to remove any binary gender markers in order to create an explicit space for people outside the gender binary. Finally, I displayed a side-by-side comparison of these language strategies. Based on Alpheratz model of production of these forms, it becomes clear that these intentions of the speaker are relevant aspect differentiating the rather similar *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*.

2. *Écriture Inclusive*, *Écriture Neutre* and French Pronominal Grammar

The two linguistic phenomena introduced in the previous chapter touch a grammatical category that has been subject of multiple investigations and analyses: grammatical gender. As presented in sections 1.1. and 1.2. of the preceding chapter the *Écriture Inclusive* and *Écriture Neutre* propose different solutions to the problems that are created by the French's language binary grammatical gender system. In the previous chapters I introduced the two phenomena of the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*, individually as well as in comparison with each other, but to some extent isolated from traditional Standard French. I argued that, while similar, these two varieties have two similar but different goals which de- and reconstruct the French grammatical gender system. In this chapter I am examining the changes introduced by these language strategies in a specific category: pronouns. As mentioned in chapter 1, the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre* both create a number of neo-pronouns. This chapter thus aims to answer the question: How do the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre* affect pronominal French grammar? In a first section I am introducing the subject of (neo-)pronouns and explaining its relevancy. In the second section I am presenting the traditional grammatical gender system in French before turning to pronominal grammar in Standard French (section 3) as well as Inclusive and Neutral French (section 4). A final section is dedicated to the formulation of a hypothesis about the use of neo-pronouns in French.

2.1. Third Person (Neo-)Pronouns in French

Personal pronouns are an interesting category to illustrate the ongoing linguistic and socio-cultural changes in the Francophone world for a number of reasons. As mentioned above, they are at the heart of the grammatical and social gender debate. The importance of the 'correct' pronoun use is an important subject in today's western societies. We are not only concerned with using the correct pronouns for the other but are also preoccupied to find the correct (neo-)pronoun for yourselves. Furthermore, the changes introduced through the *Écriture Inclusive* and *Écriture Neutre* are also affecting the pronominal category. The primary use of a pronoun is to 'replace a noun' (Moignet, 1965, p. 9), it acts as a substitution for a noun by incorporating the necessary features for recognition (Moignet, 1965). Third person pronouns denoting humans carry gender and number features: they inform the speaker about the social gender of the referent. Just as nouns they are either feminine *elle* ('she_{FEM-SG}) or *elles* ('she_{FEM-PL}'), or masculine *il* ('he_{MASC-SG}) or *ils* ('he_{MASC-PL}'). Further, they inform us about the number of people that it refers to: singular third person pronouns *elle* or *il* refer to a singular person while the plural third person pronouns *elles* and *ils* denote a group of people. The relation between pronoun gender and the referent's social gender is what makes this category relevant for the sociocultural issues at the core of this thesis. On the one hand we have to focus on the meaning carried by the (neo-)pronoun's grammatical gender feature and on the other hand on that conveyed by its number feature.

2.2. The Traditional French Grammatical Gender System

In the preceding chapters I have introduced the two grammatical gender categories that are found in Standard French: the feminine and the masculine. This feature is carried by the noun and, through the process of agreement, transposed onto its dependants, such as pronouns, determiners, adjectives and certain word forms (Corbett, 1991). With the existence of multiple

grammatical gender categories comes the question of gender assignment and prediction: how does a certain noun get its grammatical gender? In this section I will present the existing and widely accepted view on grammatical gender in French in order to provide a complete picture of French pronominal grammar. Grammatical gender systems can be categorized as either semantic or formal. In some languages, like the Dravidian language Tamil, the grammatical gender of a noun is inferred by its meaning: nouns denoting humans are either masculine or feminine and all other (inanimate) nouns are neuter (Corbett, 1994). Other languages follow a formal system: grammatical gender does not require semantic information but is related to the noun's form. In Qafar for example grammatical gender assignment follows clear phonological rules (Corbett, 1994). The French grammatical gender system is an interesting case, as it merges characteristics from both, semantic and formal grammatical gender systems.

As mentioned in chapter 1, the assignment of grammatical gender in French can appear, at a first look, to be mostly arbitrary, it seems that there are little to no rules governing grammatical gender assignment. Upon a closer look we note however certain consistencies in grammatical gender assignment: animate nouns show correlation between biological sex or social gender and grammatical gender, whereas inanimate nouns, who do not have a 'natural gender' cannot rely on such a correlation and thus need other characteristics to allow them to group them into one or the other category. Previous linguistic research has however shown that the claim of arbitrary grammatical gender assignment is false. Even if the French grammatical gender system is considered of being one of the opaquest (Corbett, 1991) as the rules governing its assignment are not immediately identifiable (especially for inanimate nouns), there have been a number of rules established to predict grammatical gender in French. These rules derive from various fields of linguistics. Following Corbett's analysis (1991) of the French grammatical gender system, we see that each of the grammatical gender categories has a semantic core: "sex-differentiable nouns denoting females are feminine" (Corbett, 1991, p. 57) and "sex-differentiable nouns denoting males are masculine" (Corbett, 1991, p. 57) (a number of these sex-differentiable nouns are illustrated in Table 2).

Table 2

Examples of sex-differentiable French nouns

| Feminine nouns | Masculine nouns |
|--|---|
| <i>mère</i> ('mother _{FEM} ') | <i>père</i> ('father _{MASC} ') |
| <i>sœur</i> ('sister _{FEM} ') | <i>frère</i> ('brother _{MASC} ') |
| <i>filles</i> ('girl _{FEM} ') | <i>garçon</i> ('boy _{MASC} ') |
| <i>femme</i> ('woman _{FEM} ') | <i>homme</i> ('man _{MASC} ') |

In Table 2 above we can see that the nouns denoting a female relative like *mère* ('mother_{FEM}') or *sœur* ('sister_{FEM}') are feminine and the nouns referring to a male relative like *père* ('father_{MASC}') or *frère* ('brother_{MASC}') are masculine. This (grammatical) gender distinction can also be found in common nouns referring to female humans like *filles*

(‘girl_{FEM}’) or *femme* (‘woman_{FEM}’) are feminine, and its male counter parts *garçon* (‘boy_{MASC}’) and *homme* (‘man_{MASC}’) are masculine.

Additionally, to these two semantic rules affecting animate nouns, grammatical gender assignment in French follows morphological and phonological rules. These are mainly affecting inanimate nouns but can be seen in animate nouns as well where they can be considered as a reflection of the semantic rules. According to the morphological rule nouns derived from adjectives with the suffixes *-eur*, *-ie*, *-ite*, *-icité*, *-esse*, *-itude*, *-étude*, *-ance*, *-ence*, *-isé* are feminine. Nouns containing the suffixes *-elle*, *-ette*, *-elette*, *-iole*, *-ule*, *-aie*, *-eraie*, *-aine* are feminine as well. Nouns derived from other nouns with the suffixes *-eau*, *-ot*, *-on*, *-eron*, *-in*, *-et*, *-illon*, *-icule*, are masculine. Finally, nouns containing the suffix *-isme* are masculine (Ayoun, 2018). The phonological rules established by Tucker, Lambert & Rigault (1977) state that nouns in /ɛzɔ̃/, /sjɔ̃/, /zjɔ̃/, /zjɔ̃/ and /tjɔ̃/ are feminine and the nouns in /ɔ̃/ are masculine.⁶ These rules allow us to place the French grammatical gender system at the border between the formal systems and semantic systems. The traditional grammatical gender system for animate nouns of Standard Modern French can thus be economically summarized by the following: social gender or biological sex governs and takes precedes (in most cases, although there are exceptions, as mentioned in Chapter 1) for grammatical gender assignment leading to a binary category distinction between feminine and masculine.

Tying this in with the previous chapter, the aspect of rules governing French grammatical gender prediction that is the most relevant for the present thesis is the claim that the core of each, the feminine and the masculine category has a semantic core. This relevancy is due to the semantic approach this thesis. It is undisputable that for animate nouns, especially those denoting humans, the semantic core lays the groundwork for grammatical gender assignment. As argued by scholars such as McConnell-Ginet (2014), there is undoubtedly a connection between the semantic core of (French) grammatical gender and society. While it has been previously considered that biological sex assigns the grammatical gender, this has changed due to the separation of biological sex and social gender in (western) societies (McConnell-Ginet, 2014): it appears that it is social gender that dictates grammatical gender.

The subject of grammatical gender includes a number of grammatical categories: grammatical gender is a feature carried by a noun which transposes it onto other categories such as pronouns, determiners, adjectives and some verb forms (Corbett, 1991), through the process of agreement. Investigating the changes introduced by the *Écriture Inclusive* and *Écriture Neutre* on the entirety of this category and the process of agreement is a task that would exceed the scope of this thesis. Due to the little preceding research on this topic the present work aims to lay the groundwork for future research on the effects of *Écriture Inclusive* and *Écriture Neutre* on the grammatical gender system in French. In order to get a in depth grasp of the changes affecting grammatical gender categories in relation to socio-cultural

⁶ These rules are the results of linguistic research by Tucker, Lambert & Rigault (1977) as well as Mel’çuk (1958). Since this thesis’ focus is on a semantic perspective of the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre* I will not go into further detail about grammatical gender assignment or prediction, a more in-depth presentation can be found in Corbett’s *Gender* (1991).

changes (namely the rising recognition of gender identities outside of man or woman as well as the increasing awareness of explicit inclusivity) I decided to dedicate this analysis to third person personal pronouns, as they are at the core of the grammatical gender debate, due to their inherent connection to speaker and referent. The following section 2.2. further delves into the motivation behind this choice.

2.3. Traditional Third Person Pronouns in French

For singular third-person pronouns the observed difficulty lies in their binary grammatical gender distinction, when referring to a woman one uses *elle* and when referring to a man one uses *il*. In addition to this male connotation *il* is also traditionally used in situations where the gender is unknown or irrelevant due to the masculine's generic function. The problems of the generic masculine have been discussed in section 1.1 and can be summarised as it being unable to actually convey this generic use, or neutrality to speakers. The traditional French pronouns are thus unable to express gender identities outside of the binary categories of man and woman as they do not present speakers with a neutral option unrelated to either of the binary social genders. This is reflected in the struggle of genderqueer humans to be correctly gendered according to their gender identify and the difficulty to refer to someone when their gender is unknown or irrelevant. For non-binary or agender people this means that they would have to choose between either of the traditional binary pronouns placing them in either the female community or the male community. In situations where social gender is irrelevant or unknown this choice is also required where it often results in the use of *il* as generic, in accordance with the grammatical gender of the referent or the mention of both traditional pronouns ('double call') (the different traditional options are illustrated in (12)).

(12)

a. Grammatical agreement with the antecedent

La personne devant toi, elle est trop grande.

The_{FEM} person_{FEM} in front you, she_{FEM} is too tall_{FEM}

The person in front of you, they are too tall.

b. Use of the generic masculine

Je ne sais pas de qui est cette veste,

Je NEG knows not of who is this jacket

j'espère qu' il viendra la chercher.

I hope that he_{MASC} will come the search

I do not know to whom belongs this jacket, I hope they will come get it.

c. Use of the double call

Je ne sais pas de qui est cette veste,

Je NEG knows not of who is this jacket

j'espère qu' il ou elle viendra la chercher

I hope that he_{MASC} OR she_{FEM} will come the search

I do not know to whom belongs this jacket, I hope they will come get it.

As seen in example (12) traditional third person pronouns do not only fall short when the referent's gender identity is outside the gender binary but in other cases. In (12a) we see a

strategy that can be considered to be rather neutral: the pronoun agrees with the referent noun, which here is a feminine noun. There are a number of nouns that maintain their grammatical gender regardless of their referent's social gender, I would argue that it can thus be considered as purely grammatic, similar to inanimate nouns. In (12b-c) this is more complicated, using *il* ('he_{MASC}') in the situation of (12b) would direct the hearer's visual representation of the person that forgot their jacket towards a man or boy. In (12c) both pronouns are used but this is on the other hand wordy it implicitly excludes genderqueer identities from the potential owners from the list of potential owners of the jacket. The traditional binary pronouns in French do therefore not provide an exhaustive linguistic representation of our society.

These difficulties regarding adequate gendering can also be found in the plural counterparts of the third person pronouns *il* and *elle*: *ils* and *elles*. These pronouns are to be used when referring to a group of two or more people, the most straight-forward, semantic distinction is: *elles* ('she_{FEM-PL}') refers to a group of women and *ils* ('he_{MASC-PL}') to a group of men. As introduced in the preceding chapter, difficulties arise when the group is composed of multiple gender identities. Traditionally, speakers follow the infamous: "*le masculine l'emporte sur le féminin*" (Eng. 'the masculine takes over the feminine') which has been, similarly to the generic masculine the subject of heavy criticism in recent years (Viennot, 2017). Concretely this means that, no matter how outnumbers men are in a group, it is still the masculine that is being used: *ils*. The feminine third-person plural pronoun *elles* is only used when the group it refers to is only composed of women.

Third-person personal pronouns thus provide a very clear overview of the difficulties that the French language is facing regarding adequate linguistic representation of the members of our society, be it in a singular or plural context. Further strengthen the decision to focus on inclusive and neutral neo-pronouns is the recent inclusion of the neo-pronoun *iel* into the dictionary in France .

2.4. Inclusive and Neutral Neo-Pronouns in French

The *Écriture Inclusive* as well as the *Écriture Neutre* affect a number of different grammatical categories such as nouns, pronouns, determiners and adjectives. There are a number of neo-pronouns in French *iel*, *ul*, *ol*, *ael* (Bulant, 2021) to only name a few, in this thesis I will be focusing on the two pronouns that are used the most frequent: *iel* and *ael*. Coincidentally these two pronouns seem to stem from the two linguistic phenomena at hand: the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*.

Taking a closer look at the neo-pronoun *iel* we see that it is a contraction of the two traditional third person pronouns *il* ('he_{MASC}') and *elle* ('she_{FEM}'). Since this neo-pronoun is now part of the dictionary we can also take a look at its formal definition:

“Singular (*iel*) or plural (*iels*) third-person personal pronoun, used to mention a person whatever their gender”⁷ (Le Robert en ligne, 2021)

⁷ « Pronom personnel sujet de la troisième personne du singulier (*iel*) et du pluriel (*iels*), employé pour évoquer une personne quel que soit son genre. » (Le Robert en ligne, 2021)

This morphological makeup, as well as the definition makes it evident that this pronoun, can be seen as part of the *Écriture Inclusive*. Taking again the criteria mentioned in the previous section 1.3. (Table 1) we see that in terms of form (both traditional grammatical gender forms are present and recognisable), motivation (to eliminate the hierarchy between genders that is translated into language) and meaning (not favouring one gender over the other, used in a context where multiple genders could be relevant and enhance linguistic representation) this neo-pronoun matches the criteria of the *Écriture Inclusive*.

For the other neo-pronoun, *ael*, I am also providing a formal definition from an online dictionary, that has however not the same wide recognition as the *Le Robert*.

“*Ael*, also written *æl*, is a third person neutral inclusive pronoun. [...] It is used in French instead of *il* or *elle*, either to designate a person whose gender we do not know or to designate a non-binary person”⁸ (Orthodidacte, n.d.)

As with *iel* above we see that form, motivation and meaning of *ael* coincide with the previously established criteria for the *Écriture Neutre*. This neo-pronoun does not display any explicit resemblance with the traditional binary pronouns, in this sense can it be considered to be combating the gender binary and finally, it is used to designate a person of unknown gender or whose gender identity is neither ‘man’ or ‘woman’. An interesting observation can be made here: while the definition of *iel* also includes its plural counterpart, the plural form *aels* is not mentioned in this definition. And after taking a look at other online resources of neo-pronouns in French I did not come across *aels* (Benjamin, 2022; Fandom, n.d.; Le collectif du « Conseil du Langage Neutre », n.d.).

2.4. Neo-Pronouns’ Effects on Pronominal Grammar

In the preceding sections I provided an overview of the traditional pronominal (2.2.) and presented the neo-pronouns resulting from the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*. In the subsequent section I will introduce a hypothesis for the different pronominal grammar systems one hand on Corbett’s analysis of grammatical gender systems and my analysis of the two linguistic phenomena affecting the Standard pronominal grammar.

Investigating what Bosch (1988) calls the descriptive content of a pronoun we can assess the status of the two neo-pronouns at hand *iel* and *ael* through their semantic content. The neutral neo-pronoun *ael* fits in what Corbett (1991) and Alpheratz (2017) define as neutral or neuter: neither male/masculine nor female/feminine. It refers to a person whose gender lies outside the binary social gender groups or unknown which does not allow us to draw any conclusion. The inclusive neo-pronoun *iel* on the other hand is not necessarily defined as neither one nor the other, based on the definition given in 2.1. by Le Robert (2021) it can also be interpreted as ‘and’, referring to both women and men. I argue that this interpretation is morphologically based as *iel* is easily recognisable as a contraction of the traditional pronouns *il* and *elle*, which can lead to the interpretation: both or neither of the binary genders are being

⁸ « *Ael*, aussi écrit *æl*, est un pronom neutre inclusif de la troisième personne. [...] Il s'utilise en français à la place de *il* ou *elle*, soit pour désigner une personne dont on ne connaît pas le genre, soit pour désigner une personne non binaire” (Orthodidacte, n.d.)

referred to. ‘Both’ and ‘neither’ have undeniably very different meanings. The former can be considered as inclusive: it can be understood, in this context of the binary genders as ‘everyone’, whereas the latter carries a connotation of exclusivity: in the same context it would be understood as ‘no one’.

Furthermore, so far rather the occurrence of the plural form *aels* appears to be rather sparse. Plural third-person pronouns are used to talk about a group of people, which often includes multiple gender identities. Similar to plural *elles* (‘she_{FEM-PL}’) which refers to a group of only women, the plural form of this neo-pronoun would be interpreted as a group of non-binary people or people of unknown gender. *Iels* however, does not have this restriction on its use, it can be interpreted as ‘all and everyone’ as its intended use is to avoid favouring the masculine *ils* and its male connotations. The following chapter presents the conducted corpus analyses which will shed light on the intentions behind the use of these neo-pronouns.

By means of these neo-pronouns we are thus able to identify three different pronominal grammars of Modern French at this point in time. The first is Standard French, it contains the traditional, binary pronouns *il/ils* (‘he_{MASC-SG}/they_{MASC-PL}’) and *elle/elles* (‘she_{FEM-SG}/they_{FEM-PL}’). In Standard French grammatical gender assignment relies natural (or biological) gender: a pronoun’s gender thus matches the referent’s natural gender. Following a chronological line, the following pronominal grammar is Inclusive French. This grammar system builds on the existing binary pronouns of Standard French but also provides an option that allows speakers to avoid commitment to one or the other: *iel/iels* (‘they_{INCL-SG}/they_{INCL-PL}’). Just as in Standard French, Inclusive French relies on the referent’s natural gender for grammatical gender assignment. Finally, the third pronominal grammar system identified in this research is Neutral French. This grammar does not only introduce a fourth pronoun (*ael/aels* (‘they_{NEUT-SG}/they_{NEUT-PL}’)) but also illustrates society’s switch from natural to social gender. As previously mentioned, western societies moved away from social gender being depended on biological sex, considering it a different, not necessarily related, concept. In Neutral French the pronouns receive their gender thus from the referent’s social gender.

This chapter provided an outline of the French grammatical gender system and its pronominal grammar, aiming to answer the question: How do the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre* affect pronominal French grammar? After analysing the neo-pronouns in focus, we can see that there is a current evolution of two other pronominal grammars based on the varieties of Inclusive and Neutral French. This evolution is partly diachronic and synchronic, at this point in time all three grammars: Standard, Inclusive and Neutral French coexist.

3. Corpus Analysis

In the previous chapters I presented the current changes that can be found in French in relation to grammatical gender and related them to the existing grammatical gender system. In the last section of the preceding chapter, I have presented current changes in pronominal grammar in French. While this proposition seems linguistically sound, an important aspect has to be taken into account here: speaker behaviour. In order to build a model that accurately reflects the semantics of the neo-pronouns in focus here it is imperative to observe how speakers use them. As mentioned in chapter 1, the *Écriture Inclusive* and *Écriture Neutre* originate from slightly different social groups, which might overlap but each of these French varieties cater to a different sociocultural necessity and reality. The question that arises now is what has been introduced as the second research question: What can be observed about the usage of neo-pronouns and their referents? In the following chapter I look into speaker behaviour in relation to neo-pronouns. This chapter presents the analyses of two online corpora of French speakers' usage of the neo-pronouns *iel(s)* and *ael(s)*. In the first section I introduce a corpus composed of Google search results and in the second section the corpora composed of tweets containing neo-pronouns.

Based on the observations presented in the previous chapter we can formulate a series of predictions about frequency and distribution of the neo-pronouns for the corpus analysis presented in the following chapter 3. Furthermore, it is possible to put forward more explicit hypotheses about the semantics of the *Écriture Inclusive* and *Écriture Neutre*, by the means of the chosen inclusive and neutral neo-pronouns.

- i. The frequency of *iel* as well as its plural counterpart *iels* is expected to be higher than the that of the neutral neo-pronouns *ael* and *aels*.
- ii. *Aels*, the plural form of the neutral neo-pronoun *ael* is expected to be rather uncommon in use.
- iii. The number feature is expected to remain unaffected: *iel* and *ael* refer is used in a singular or quantificational context whereas *iels* and *aels* is used to refer to a group of people
- iv. The meaning and thus referent of the inclusive neo-pronouns *iel* and *iels* are expected to be different from the neutral neo-pronoun *ael* and *aels*. The former are more likely to be used in general situations, as opposed to the latter who I anticipate being more restricted to non-binary gender identities.

Hypotheses i and ii can be verified by looking at the frequency of each neo-pronoun in a specific time frame. Hypotheses iii and iv can be tested by looking at the type of referent each neo-pronoun is related to in a certain context.

At this point it appears important to note that the following interpretations and proposed hypothesis and meanings are not meant to serve as an attempt of standardization of these *Écritures*. I am merely attempting to record and detangle the reasoning behind the development and increasing use of two so similar yet different linguistic strategies. Their co-existence is,

undoubtedly, proof for their need in different context, situations which can most likely mainly be explained through a difference in meaning.

3.1. Google Corpus

With the neo-pronoun *iel* being included in the dictionary in October 2021, it can be considered as confirmed that the frequency of use of this neo-pronoun is quite high (Bimbenet, 2021). As introduced in chapter 1, the addition of *iel* into the dictionary is based on the fact that this neo-pronoun is rather common, and its frequency is increasing. This allows me to hypothesize that when looking at speaker behaviour we will find a great number of occurrences of this neo-pronoun. It is important to note that this neo-pronoun has not only been added in its singular form (*iel*), but the entry also includes its plural counterpart *iels* (Le Robert, 2021). The other pronoun this thesis aims to shed light on is the neo-pronoun originating from the *Écriture Neutre*: *aël/aels*. A first step in understanding and investigating the use of a word is a google search, introducing these neo-pronouns as a query will provide us with results on the web that contain this neo-pronoun and would allow us to draw conclusions regarding its usage and frequency. Based on this assumption I have built a spider crawling and scraping Google search results for each of the neo-pronouns.

3.1.1. Methodology

To build my spider I used the integrated development environment provided by JetBrains: PyCharm (PyCharm 2021.3.3, 2022). In the PyCharm environment I build a web crawler and scraper with the open-source web crawling and scraping framework Scrapy (Scrapy, 2022). The created spider crawls and scrapes google search results based on an indicated item and saves these results in a csv file. I have modified a source code by Kerins (2011) according to the criteria of my Google corpus. First I specified the country code as ‘fr’ with the following command: `'country_code': 'fr'`, in order to narrow down the search results. Then I removed the ‘allowed domains’ command so that the spider crawls and scrapes all domains. Finally, I introduced my search items, the singular third person neo-pronouns *iel* and *aël* as well as their plural counterparts *iels* and *aels*. By running the spider in the PyCharm terminal, the title of the google search results, a snippet of the content of the article or webpage as well as its url in a csv file. The full code can be found in Appendix 1.

The collected data was transferred from the csv file to an excel document in order to analyse it. In a first step I removed all the entries that were not in French or where what the algorithm considered as a neo-pronoun was actually an acronym. From the total of 519 Google search results that were scraped, 382 were thus removed. The remaining 137 results were articles, classified into the following criteria: ‘occurrence in article as pronoun’, which refers to the articles containing the neo-pronoun and using it as a replacement of the traditional pronouns, ‘article about the neo-pronoun’ and finally ‘online dictionary entry’ for the neo-pronoun. Adding this classification allowed me to get a better overview on the type of search results obtained through the web scraper. Articles where the neo-pronoun occurs as such reflect a different aspect than online dictionary entries or articles about the neo-pronoun. The latter reflect speakers’ opinions on a certain neo-pronoun, dictionary entries explain their intended

meaning and use and articles where neo-pronouns occur instead, or traditional pronouns show how and who uses these neo-pronouns.

3.1.2. Results

Table 3 presents the number of occurrences for each neo pronouns and the type of occurrence for each of the four neo-pronouns.

Table 3

Number and types of occurrences of neo-pronouns

| | <i>iel</i> | <i>iels</i> | <i>ael</i> | <i>aels</i> |
|----------------------------------|------------|-------------|------------|-------------|
| Occurrence in article as pronoun | 1 | 2 | 0 | 0 |
| Article about neo-pronoun | 115 | 0 | 0 | 0 |
| Online dictionary entry | 11 | 2 | 6 | 0 |
| Total | 127 | 4 | 6 | 0 |

Takin a look at Table 3, the first thing that catches our eye is the overwhelming presence of the inclusive third-person singular neo-pronoun *iel*: from the 137 analysed results, 127 (or 92.7%) contained *iel*. The plural counterpart *iels* occurs 4 times (or in 2.92% of the results). The neutral pronoun *ael* occurs in 6 out of the 137 results (or in 4.38%) while its plural counterpart *aels* does not occur at all. Taking a closer look at the type of occurrence per neo-pronoun we see that even though *iel* has a high occurrence it is only used in an article once (0.79% of the occurrences), for the other neo-pronouns this number is similar: *iels* occurs twice (50% of the occurrences) and *ael* not at all. For *iel* the remaining 126 occurrences are in articles about the neo-pronoun (115 out of 127 occurrences or 90.55%) and online dictionary entries (11 occurrences or in 8.66% of its occurrences). The 2 remaining occurrences (or the remaining 50% of the occurrences) of *iels* are dictionary entries and *ael* only occurs in dictionary entries (6 occurrences). Finally, we turn to the time frame of the articles: the earliest article was published in the 11th of November 2019 and the latest the 12th of May 2022. It further seems important to mention that the two days where a significant number of these results were published the 17th and 18th November 2021: for both days the articles contained *iel*. On the 17th of November, 28 articles were published and on the 18th of November 2016. For 15 dictionary entries I was unable to find a publication date.

3.1.3. Discussion

The collected data provides us with what can be considered an interesting overview about the different opinions (and meanings) of one neo-pronoun: *iel*. Out of the 137 scraped articles 115 are articles about this neo-pronoun and often the writer's opinion of it. Interestingly, most of the 115 articles about the neo-pronoun *iel* are not negative, this leads me to assume that the negative opinions are voiced by a small nevertheless loud minority of speakers. For the remaining neo-pronouns *iels*, *ael* and *aels* the web scraper returned mostly dictionary entries.

While this data certainly is worth to be analysed further, the reason behind my data collection is to have real-life examples of the uses of the chosen neo-pronouns. The scraped data from this corpus does not provide us with such information. As a consequence, I am conducting another corpus analysis. The following section introduces the corpora based on tweets which I consider reflecting speaker behaviour concerning neo-pronouns.

3.2. Twitter Corpora

The results from the Google corpus presented in the previous section are insufficient to draw any conclusions about speaker behaviour and their interpretation of these neo-pronouns. Therefore, I turned to another part of the internet and focused on a social media platform: Twitter. This platform was created to allow users to easily share their thoughts. The US American company is a widely used network for so-called microblogging (Twitter, 2022a). The term microblogging refers to “the activity of sending regular short messages, photos or videos over the internet [...] as a means of keeping people informed about your activities and thoughts” (Oxford University Press, 2022). The social media platform Twitter allows users to post news, their opinions and thoughts. Due to these posts’ format, so-called ‘Tweets’ of a maximum of 280 characters (Twitter, Inc., 2022b), they can be described as a ‘cross between blogging and instant messaging’ (Emerald Publishing, n.d.). The platform’s set up, its goal of information sharing among people and its popularity as a tool of online communication provides us a good insight into speakers’ current language use.

In the following section I introduce four corpora. These are collected by scraping twitter for tweets containing either of the four neo-pronouns (*iel*, *iels*, *ael* and *aels*). Furthermore, I have scraped certain meta data of the collected tweets creators which will be included in the analysis of the corpora.

3.2.1. Methodology

The scraping tool used to collect tweets for the four corpora was the python package `snsrape` (JustAnotherArchivist, 2022) used in the Anaconda PowerShell Prompt environment (Anaconda PowerShell Prompt). In order to scrape tweets from a text search query I used a code provided by Desai (2022). This code collects tweets containing the specified search query starting on a set date working its way backwards until reaching the specified number of tweets. The code saves the date and time of the tweet, its id, its content and the username of the author, in a csv file. I ran this code four separate times, each time using another neo-pronoun as the search query. The four query terms were: *iel*, *iels*, *ael*, and *aels*. I modified the number of tweets scraped of the original code, setting it to 500 for the neopronouns *iel*, *iels* and *aels*. The neopronoun *ael* however raised some complication as it seems to be less common and many tweets containing this morpheme use it with a different meaning. (Common uses of *ael* are as the first name *Ael* and as an acronym for *Association des étudiant.e.s en Lettres* (Eng. ‘Association of literature students’)). For this reason, a total of 1000 tweets were scraped for this neo-pronoun. In order to assure that the scraped tweets were in French I specified the language with: `lang:fr` I set the date to the 30th of April 2022 as this was the date I started working on this thesis. All four codes can be found in Appendix 2.

The usernames have been deleted to protect the user’s privacy and anonymity and because of their irrelevancy for this research. This has also been the case for the tweet’s id.

3.2.2. Results

Tweets that did not contain uses of neo-pronouns or where the ‘neo-pronoun’ was in reality an acronym have been deleted or name. One additional tweet has been removed due to its transphobic⁹ content. Table 4 below provides insights in the number of tweets removed and kept per neo-pronoun.

Table 4

Number of tweets per corpus

| Corpus | Neo-Pronoun | Scraped tweets | Removed tweets | Remaining tweets |
|--------|-------------|----------------|----------------|------------------|
| 1 | <i>iel</i> | 500 | 103 | 397 |
| 2 | <i>iels</i> | 500 | 9 | 491 |
| 3 | <i>ael</i> | 1000 | 772 | 218 |
| 4 | <i>aels</i> | 500 | 161 | 339 |

As illustrated in Table 4 above, the four corpora are: Corpus 1 contains tweets with the neo-pronoun *iel* (with 397 entries), Corpus 2 is made up of 438 tweets with the neo-pronoun *iels*, Corpus 3 consists of 368 tweets where the neo-pronoun *ael* appears and finally Corpus 4 includes 335 tweets with the neo-pronoun *aels*.

The compiled corpora aim to reflect the (written) behaviour of speakers of the two French varieties that are in focus in this thesis. On the one hand we have the corpora of Inclusive French (the *Écriture Inclusive*): Corpus 1 and 2 which contain tweets with the neo-pronouns *iel* and *iels*, respectively. On the other hand, we have the two corpora for Neutral French (the *Écriture Neutre*) which consist of tweets containing the neo-pronoun *ael* (Corpus 3) and *aels* (Corpus 4). The following section interprets and discusses the results presented in 3.2.2. above. In order to give a thorough analysis of the results so far I will be comparing the general distribution of the use of the four neo-pronouns before I am going to interpret the potential reasoning/meaning behind the use of these neo-pronouns. To allow a better visualisation of the data Table 5 below presents an overview of the data found in the four corpora.

Table 5

Corpora Data Overview

| | <i>Corpus 1</i> | <i>Corpus 2</i> | <i>Corpus 3</i> | <i>Corpus 4</i> |
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
|--|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|

⁹ Transphobia is the irrational fear, dislike or prejudice of trans people leading to discrimination against them. (Merriam Webster, 2022; Young Scot, n.d.)

| | | | | |
|-----------------|---------------------------------|----------------------|-------------------------------|--|
| Timespan | 1 d, 2 h, 11 min, 46 s | 1 d, 14 h, 43 min | 44 d, 1 h, 34 min, 49 s | 5 a, 11 m, 6 d, 22 h, 35 m, 47 s |
| Total | 397 | 491 | 218 | 339 |

The most striking difference between the collected corpora is undoubtedly the number of entries, presented again in Table 5 above. Corpus 1,2 and 4 have a similar number of entries, with Corpus 2 having the highest number of entries (391). Corpus 1 and Corpus 4 have a lower but similar number of entries and Corpus 3 is considerably lower with just over 200 entries. Here it is imperative to point out that for Corpora 1,2 and 4 the code was instructed to scrape 500 tweets. Running the same code for Corpus 3 resulted in a such a drastic difference in occurrences of the neo-pronoun *ael*, that the number of tweets scraped had to be set as higher (to 1000). This allows me to infer that the use of *ael* is less frequent than that of *iel* and *iels*. Furthermore, when interpreting these results, it is important to take the timespan in which these have been posted. Interestingly Corpus 1 and Corpus 2 contain tweets collected in a bit over a day, for Corpus 3 however, the tweets were posted in a time span of around 44 days and Corpus 4 stretches over a period of about 5 years and 11 months.

The tweets in each of the four corpora have been categorised based on the type of referent of the neo-pronouns. Classifying the tweets in such a manner will allow me to draw conclusion on the (intended) meaning of these neo-pronouns, relevant for modelling the semantics of these pronouns. The first category contains tweets where the neo-pronoun is used in situations where the gender of the referent is either unknown to the speaker or irrelevant to the statement. The second category contains the tweets where the speaker is referring to a non-binary referent. In the third category the tweets' referent as a mixed group, i.e., a group composed of multiple gender identities either factually (the speaker knows this) or assumed (i.e., generic statements about people where one can assume that not all members are of the same gender). Finally, a fourth category was added post-hoc: hyperinclusivity. This refers to tweets where the author uses more than one (neo-)pronoun, presumably in an attempt to not misgender someone and/or include everyone. In the following subsections I am going to take a closer look at the scraped tweets and created corpora one by one.

3.2.2.1. Corpus 1: *iel*

Corpus 1 is the corpus consisting of the 397 tweets containing the neo-pronoun *iel*. These tweets have been taken in a timeframe from the 28th of April 2022 (23:43:56) until the 30th of April 2022 (01:55:42), these tweets have therefore been posted over the span of 1 day, 2 hours, 11 minutes and 46 seconds. As illustrated in Table 6, these tweets have been categorized based on the neo-pronouns' referent.

Table 6

Number of occurrences per referent in Corpus 1

| | <i>iel</i> |
|---------------------------|------------|
| Unknown/irrelevant gender | 98 |
| Non-binary | 283 |
| Mixed group | 14 |
| Hyperinclusivity | 2 |
| Total | 397 |

In 97 tweets (24.43%) the neo-pronoun is used to refer to a person whose gender is either unknown (illustrated in 13a) or irrelevant (13b). In the grand majority, namely 283 (or 71.28%) of the collected tweets, *iel* is being used to refer to a non-binary person (13c). Due to the frequency of so-called typos in text speech which lead to missing last letters (such as the -s in *iels*) further the lack of phonological difference between *iel* (\jɛl) and *iels* (\jɛl), which lead me to assume that singular *iel* in combination with a verb in the third person plural form is the result of a typo or autocorrect. I am thus considering singular *iel* in combination with a verb in the third person plural form as referring to a group of people, this phenomena occurs in 15 tweets (or in 0.05%) (13d). Finally, 2 tweets are considered ‘hyperinclusive’ (13f).

(13)

- a. “*Vous parlez de Jean Michel ? C'est pas simple, iel refuse toujours de donner ses pronoms.*”
Are you talking about Jean Michel? It’s not easy, they_{INCL-3P-SG} still refuse to give their pronouns.
- b. “*Vraiment, chacun fait ce qu'iel veut*”
Really, everyone does what they_{INCL-3P-SG} want
- c. “*Je viens de repenser à son égo brisé quand C¹⁰ à compris que même avec des talons iel était plus petit.e que moi*”
I just thought about their broken ego when C understood that even with heels they_{INCL-3P-SG} are smaller than me
- d. “*Ça m'arrive souvent mais de façon inversé, je pensais que certains de mes mutus étaient proche de mon âge et puis j'apprend qu'iel ont 23 ans*”
That often happens to me but the other way around, I thought some of my mutuals were close to my age but then I learn that they_{INCL-3P-SG} are_{3P-PL} 23 years old
- e. “*j'ai découvert le personnage de aled dans la série (de livres) heartstopper, et il/iel a l'air just adorable. ces livres j'ai l'impression qui sont graves réconfortants comme la série*”
I discovered the character of aled in the (book) series heartstopper, and he_{MASC-3P-SG}/they_{INCL-3P-SG} seem just adorable. These books, I feel like the are very comforting as a series

In example (13a), the creator of the tweet is referring to a person whose gender they do not know and in order to not use the wrong pronoun and misgender them they opt for the inclusive *iel*. This allows them to omit the gender of the referent and avoid committing to one of the binary

¹⁰ Name redacted for privacy reasons

genders without being sure. The tweet in (13b) other hand refers to any human, here the utterer is not talking about a specific person but rather about the abstract representation, they use a bound variable not referring to a single entity but to those that are encompassed by the quantifier *chacun* ('everyone_{MASC}'). This group of entities does not a specific gender as 'everyone' includes humans of any gender, hence the choice of a non-gendered pronoun like *iel*. For (13c) the referent is 'C' a person whose pronouns are *iel* ('they'/'them'). Example (13d) shows one of the tweets allowing me to consider singular *iel* in this context as an erroneous version of plural *iels*. The subject *iel*'s verb is *ont* ('have_{3P-PL}'), which is the third person plural form of the verb *avoir* ('to have_{INF}'). From the context and verb form I conclude that the writer is referring to multiple people whose age they are surprised by. Finally, with the tweet in (13f) we see the explicit attempt to not misgender a character (Aled) from the book series *Heartstopper* by Alice Oseman whose gender seems to be unclear.

3.2.2.2. Corpus 2: *iels*

The second corpus created consists of 491 tweets in which the neo-pronoun *iels*, the plural counterpart of '*iel*'. The tweets have been posted between the 28th of April 2022 (11:02) and the 30th of April 2022 (01:45), in a time span of 1 day, 14 hours and 43 minutes. The categorisation of these tweets based on the type of referent is illustrated in 6.

Table 6

Number of occurrences per referent in Corpus 2

| | <i>iels</i> |
|---------------------------|-------------|
| Unknown/irrelevant gender | 0 |
| Non-binary | 0 |
| Mixed group | 489 |
| Hyperinclusivity | 2 |
| Total | 491 |

There are no tweets where *iels*' referent is of unknown gender or where the referent is nonbinary. In 488 tweets (99.39%) the neo-pronoun's referent is a mixed group and it occurs once in a tweet (0.61%) with other (neo-pronouns). The following examples (14) provide examples of the tweets from Corpus 2.

(14)

- a. “(Oui je suis suivie par peu de personnes mais *iels* sont formidables)”
(Yes I am followed by few people but *they*_{INCL-3P-PL} are great.)
- b. “*Il/elle/iels* s'appellent The Planetary Defence Side Project et je trouve aucune info dessus”
*He*_{MASC-3P-SG}/*she*_{FEM-3P-SG}/*they*_{INCL-3P-PL} are called The Planetary Defence Side project and I can't find any info about it.

In (14a), the person is referring to the people that follow their twitter account. While the tweet presented in (14b) also seems to be referring to a group of people we see the presence of the two traditional pronouns *il* ('he_{SING}') and *elle* ('she_{SING}').

3.2.2.3. Corpus 3: *ael*

The neutral neo-pronoun *ael* appears in 218 of the 1000 scraped tweets, published between the 9th of March 2022 (22:40:40) and the 23rd of April 2022 (00:15:29). These tweets, posted in a time span of 44 days, 1 hour, 34 minutes and 49 seconds, make up Corpus 3. Table 7 below presents the categorization of the tweets based on the type of their referent.

Table 7

Number of occurrences per referent in Corpus 3

| | <i>ael</i> |
|---------------------------|------------|
| Unknown/irrelevant gender | 4 |
| Non-binary | 213 |
| Mixed group | 0 |
| Hyperinclusivity | 1 |
| Total | 218 |

As illustrated above, *ael* is used in 4 tweets (1.83%) to refer to a person of unknown or irrelevant gender (15a) and in 213 tweets (97.71%) it is used to refer to a non-binary person (15b). There is also one tweet where the neopronoun is found in combination with other pronouns (15c). This neo-pronoun is never used to refer to a group of people.

(15)

- a. *“Mais ce n'est pas la seule et il faut défendre les droits de chaque individu à bénéficié d'un égal accès aux droits même si iel est TDS, sans juger ael de faire ce choix ou de continuer ce travail ”*

But it is not the only one and you have to defend the rights of everyone to benefit from an equal access to rights even if they are a sexworker, without judging them_{NEUT-3P-SG} for making this choice or continuing this work

- b. *“je le suis tellement reconnaissante, je suis tellement heureuse avec ael”*

I am so grateful, I am so happy with them_{NEUT-3P-SG}

- c. *“C'est toujours la même réponse qui revient à chaque fois qu'on explique qu'iel/ael est une personne non-binaire.”*

It is always the same answer that comes every time we explain they_{INCL-3P-SG}/they_{NEUT-3P-SG} are a non-binary person

The tweet in (15a) illustrates the use of *ael* in a context where the social gender of the referent is irrelevant: no matter the person's gender they should not be judged for their profession. This irrelevancy stems, as previously introduced from the pronoun being a bound variable. Again,

chaque ('every') is a quantifier that does not refer to a specific entity but rather encompassed by *individu* ('individual_{MASC}'). In (15b) the creator of the tweet is referring to their (presumably) partner who seems to be nonbinary and uses the neo-pronoun *aël*. In the final example (15c) the creator also included the inclusive neo-pronoun *iel* when talking about a non-binary person, again, in an attempt to not misgender the referent.

3.2.2.4. Corpus 4: *aëls*

The last corpus, Corpus 4 is made up of tweets using the plural neo-pronoun *aëls*. From the 500 scraped tweets 339 make use of this neo-pronoun. Interestingly these tweets have been posted over a larger period of time than the tweets from the other three corpora. The first tweet from this corpus was published the 13th of May 2016 (15:50:24) and the last the 20th of April 2022 (14:26:11). Corpus 4 contains thus tweets posted over the time of 5 years, 11 months, 6 days, 22 hours, 35 minutes and 47 seconds. Table 8 below presents the categorization of the tweets based on the type of their referent.

Table 8

Number of occurrences per referent in Corpus 1

| | <i>aëls</i> |
|---------------------------|-------------|
| Unknown/irrelevant gender | 0 |
| Non-binary | 5 |
| Mixed group | 328 |
| Hyperinclusivity | 6 |
| Total | 339 |

As illustrated in Table 8, the neo-pronoun *aëls* is used mostly to refer to a group of people, in 328 tweets (or 96.76%). In 5 tweets (1.47%) the referent is a nonbinary person and in 6 tweets (1.77%) the neo-pronoun is found next to other (neo-)pronouns. Examples of these tweets are presented in examples (16) below.

(16)

- a. “*Je vais passer la journée avec A¹¹ (...) aëls viennent à Lyon*”
I am going to spend the day with A they_{NEUT-3P-PL} are coming to Lyon
- b. “*C'est un roman qui me tient à cœur et je me réjouis que Virgile et Camille puissent continuer leur chemin entre les mains des lecteurs, aëls m'accompagnent depuis quelques années maintenant !*”
It is a novel dear to my heart and I am happy that Virgile and Camille can continue their journey between the hands of the readers, they_{NEUT-3P-PL} have been keeping me company for few years now
- c. “*Est ce qu'il y a des gens qui regardaient le Morning Live quand ils/elles/aëls étaient petits/petites?*”

¹¹ Redacted for privacy

Are there people who watched Morning Live when they_{MASC-3P-PL}/they_{FEM-3P-PL}/they_{NEUT-3P-PL} were small/small?

16a shows the use of *aels* to reference a non-binary person: while neo-pronoun and verbs are in the third person plural the speaker is talking about a singular person ‘A’, a practice similar to singular they in English. In example 16b the creator of the tweet is referring to Virgile and Camille, two characters of a book, thus a group of people. Finally, in 16c we see not only the neo-pronoun *aels* but also the binary third person plural pronouns *ils* (‘they_{MASC-3P-PL}’) and *elles* (‘they_{FEM-3P-PL}’).

3.3. General Discussion

Considering this data, we can draw certain conclusions related to the use of these neo-pronouns. First, the neo-pronouns *iel* and *iels* are without a doubt more frequent than their neutral counterparts *ael* and *aels*. This can be explained to the more widespread knowledge of the neo-pronouns *iel* and *iels* as they have been not only the subject of a heated public debate reaching its peak with their introduction into the dictionary *Le Robert* in 2021. Speakers are thus most likely aware of the existence of a neo-pronoun that would allow to avoid the exclusive use of the generic masculine or misgendering a person: *iel(s)*, but not necessarily of other neo-pronouns. This claim is further supported when we see the timespan of the collected tweets. The code I used to scrape these tweets works its way backwards from a set start date, the 30th of April in this case, until it reached the specified number of tweets: 500 for *iel*, *iels* and *aels* and 1000 for *ael*. Corpus 1 and 2 reached the quota fairly quickly while Corpus 3 and 4 span over a longer period of time, indicating that there are more tweets using the neo-pronouns *iel* or *iels* on a daily basis than there are tweets containing the neo-pronouns *ael* and *aels*. The use of the plural neo-pronoun *aels* seems to be especially rare as some of the tweets in Corpora 4 date back to 2016, 5 years before the set date.

Taking a closer look at the content of the corpora, I now turn to the type of referent of the neopronoun used in a tweet. The distribution of referent type per corpora is presented again in Table 9 below.

Table 9

Referenttype per Corpora

| | <i>Corpus 1</i> | <i>Corpus 2</i> | <i>Corpus 3</i> | <i>Corpus 4</i> |
|---------------------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|-----------------|
| Unknown/irrelevant gender | 98 | 0 | 4 | 0 |
| Non-binary | 283 | 0 | 213 | 5 |
| Mixed group | 14 | 489 | 0 | 328 |
| Hyperinclusivity | 2 | 2 | 1 | 6 |

Let us start by taking a look at the plural neo-pronouns. It comes as no surprise that the plural neo-pronouns *iels* and *aels* are found, in the vast majority of entries, to be referring to a group of multiple people. This can be considered its prototypical meaning. At a first glance we see

that the plural neo-pronouns *iels* (Corpus 2) and *aels* (Corpus 4) are not used to refer to a person whose gender is irrelevant or unknown, this is not surprising as these are plural neo-pronouns, referring to more than one person. Additionally, the corpus shows no use of the plural *iels* having a singular, non-binary referent. Contrastingly this is not the case for *aels*: in 5 instances the plural third-person pronoun *aels* is used to refer to a nonbinary person. The possibility of a typo or other kind of error is unlikely as the verb is also in the third person plural. An example of these tweets is presented in (17).

(17)

"Je voulais faire des chocolats à A¹² pour le 14 mais aels supportent pas les chocolats donc je sais pas quoi faire "

I wanted to make chocolates for A for the 14th but they_{NEUT-3P-PL} don't like_{3P-PL} chocolates so I don't know what to do

As seen in (17) above, the neo-pronoun's referent is A. There is little doubt about the singularity of the referent in any of these 5 tweets. 4 out of these 5 tweets have been posted by the same user which allows the claim that it is a very specific practice that is rather rare, even among speakers of Neutral/Neo-French. A possible explanation could be a transfer from English. The use of English is not uncommon in the media and especially on social media platforms like Twitter which are US-American, one could thus assume that there is a certain knowledge of the English language among the users. Furthermore, the English language has a traditional pronoun that is often used to refer to non-binary people: singular they. In sentences like, 'I saw Sam yesterday, they were happy', we see that this pronoun behaves like a plural pronoun (it triggers the third person plural inflection of the verb to be) but is used to describe a singular person (Sam). This could be copied by the speakers in instances like (17).

Now, let us turn towards the singular neo-pronouns *iel* and *ael*. The frequency of these neo-pronouns as well as their different referents is rather dissimilar. The inclusive neo-pronoun *iel* is clearly more frequent than the neutral *ael*, with Corpora of 397 versus 2018 entries respectively. The differences are also found in the distributions of the type of referent, for both neo-pronouns the most common referent among the scraped tweets is a non-binary referent. It is however noteworthy to point out the difference in the number of times these neo-pronouns are used to refer to a referent of unknown or irrelevant gender. For *iel* this happens in 98 tweets and for *ael* in only for tweets. To strengthen these claims, I am analysing the examples in (18) below.

(18)

a. Irrelevant gender : specific context

"Fais attention @BG¹³, ça fait 3 fois que @a¹⁴ est cancelled. Si ça continue, iel finira avec une émission sur CNEWS..."

¹² Redacted for privacy

¹³ Redacted for privacy

¹⁴ Redacted for privacy

Be careful @BG, it has been 3 times that @a has been cancelled. If it continues, they_{INCL-3P-SG} will end up with a show on CNEWS...

b. Unknown gender : generic context

“*un.e psychiatre compétent.e c'est mieux parce que en plus si l'envie est ael pourra faire une prescription pour le TDAH*”

a competent psychiatrist is better because if you want they_{NEUT-3P-SG} can write a referral for ADHD

c. Nonbinary referent

“*Y¹⁵ iel dit un truc même con je rt je réfléchis même pas*”

Even if they_{INCL-3P-SG} say something stupid I rt I don't even think about it

d. Nonbinary referent

“*L¹⁶ s'est bien endormi.e en tout cas j'espère ael fait de beaux rêves pcqu'on regardait *Conjuring**”

L fell asleep in any case I hope they_{NEUT-3P-SG} have nice dreams because we watched *Conjuring*

18a is an interesting example, we are dealing here with a ‘twitter bot’, an account that has been coded to regularly tweet a specific sentence (*Fais attention @, ça fait 3 fois que @est cancelled. Si ça continue, iel finira avec une émission sur CNEWS...*) and fill in the blanks with a certain account after the @ that fills the requirements set in the code. There is thus no way of knowing which pronoun to use beforehand, as there is no human behind this specific tweet, since the gender is thus unknown, and to a certain extent irrelevant the creator of this bot used the neo-pronoun *iel* in order to avoid misgendering. In example 18b the gender is also irrelevant: the creator of the tweet states the benefits of having a psychiatrist. While the referent is inside the domain of the clause in both example (@a for (18a) and *un.e psychiatre* for (18b)) their (grammatical) gender feature is not accessible information (18a) or inclusive. In (18b) which uses the *Écriture Inclusive* for the gendered indefinite articles *un/une* (‘_{aMASC-SG/aFEM-SG}’). In (18c) and (18d) the referent is also overtly present in the sentence: Y (18c) and L(18d), here we are however, dealing with a specific person, friend or partner of the tweet’s creators, who is using these neo-pronouns.

Comparing the number of entries illustrated in Table 9, we see that *iel* is used in 25.72% of the entries as generic term or a bound variable, whereas *ael* is used only 1.84% of the time. This allows me to speculate that not only is *iel* a common ‘inclusive’ pronoun, meaning that it can be used to refer to ‘whomever’, but it also fills a more ‘common’ role in referent designation. The neo-pronoun *ael* on the other hand is not only a very community-specific pronoun, but it also seems to be considered as less inclusive but more specific, in the sense that speakers of Neo-French require a specific context to use this neo-pronoun: that of a non-binary referent who uses this pronoun. This claim is further supported by what I have previously called hyperinclusivity.

¹⁵ Redacted for privacy

¹⁶ Redacted for privacy

Hyperinclusivity is the presence of more than one (neo-)pronoun in a tweet, underlining the creators' efforts to not misgender their referent. Among the four corpora created we can see 11 instances of this hyper inclusivity. When we look at the instances of hyperinclusivity with the neo-pronouns *iel* and *iels* we see that these can be attributed to the fact that the creator of the tweet is not sure about the referents gender identity and thus makes the explicit effort to present all possible options (illustrated in (19))

(19)

- a. “*Je penche pour la 2eme version le/la/iel concernant.*”
I am leaning towards the 2nd version concerning them_{MASC-3P-SG}/them_{FEM-3P-SG}/them_{INCL-3P-SG}
- b. “*j’ai découvert le personnage de aled dans la série (de livres) heartstopper, et il/iel a l’air just adorable. ces livres j’ai l’impression qui sont graves réconfortants comme la série*”
I discovered the character of aled in the (book) series heartstopper, and he_{MASC-3P-SG}/they_{INCL-3P-SG} seem just adorable. These books, I feel like they are very comforting as a series
- c. “*Qu’ils, elles, iels, EXIGENT que cette parole soit portée ?*”
That they_{MASC-3P-PL}/they_{FEM-3P-PL}/they_{INCL-3P-PL} DEMAND that this statement?
- d. “*Il/elle/iels s’appellent The Planetary Defence Side Project et je trouve aucune info dessus*”
He_{MASC-3P-SG}/she_{FEM-3P-SG}/they_{INCL-3P-PL} are called The Planetary Defence Side project and I can’t find any info about it.

It appears that the creators of the tweets (19a) and (19b) are not sure about the gender of their referent. This is especially apparent in (19b), where the person is talking about a character from the book and tv series Heartstopper whose gender identity seems to be ambiguous. This explicit effort to include the whole population is also found in (19c) and (19d) where the creators of the tweets use ‘all three’ pronouns that are commonly used to refer to people in their plural forms so as to not exclude anyone. This pronoun choice can be explained by overly cautious speakers who are very aware of the harm misgendering causes and actively seek to avoid it as much as possible.

Interestingly this practice takes a different shape with the neo-pronouns *ael* and *aels*. There are more instances of hyper inclusivity (7 as opposed to 4 for *iel/iels*). While the tweets from the hyperinclusivity category in Corpus 1 and 2 are never in combination with *ael(s)* the ones in Corpus 3 and 4 are always in combination with *iel(s)*, except one (20f). The tweets are presented in (20).

(20)

- a. “*C’est toujours la même réponse qui revient à chaque fois qu’on explique qu’iel/ael est une personne non-binaire.*”
It is always the same answer that comes every time we explain they_{INCL-3P-SG}/they_{NEUT-3P-SG} are a non-binary person

- b. “*D'accord et ramène des potes en espérant que iels/aels soient chaud*”
OK and bring your friends hoping they_{INCL-3P-PL}/they_{NEUT-3P-PL} are down
- c. “*je ne pense pas que les identités de genres dépendent des stéréotypes de genre souvent les personnes qui ne se sentent pas bien dans le genre auquel iels/aels sont attribués sentent une dysphorie plus ou moins profonde et ça peut exister chez une personne dès le plus jeune âge*”
I don't think that gender identities depend on gender stereotypes the people who don't feel like the gender they_{INCL-3P-PL}/they_{NEUT-3P-PL} have been assigned to often feel more or less deep dysphoria and it can appear from a very young age
- d. “*J'suis d'accord sur tout, mais Levy et Musso c'est giga éclatax. Après si y'a des gens qui aiment tant mieux pour eux, s'ils/elles/iels/aels passent un bon moment I suppose.*”
I agree with everything, but Levy and Musso are very crazy. Then again, if there are people who like them good for them, if they_{MASC-3P-PL}/they_{FEM-3P-PL}/they_{INCL-3P-PL}/they_{NEUT-3P-PL} have a good time I suppose
- e. “*Iels/aels sont fâché.es*”
They_{INCL-3P-PL}/they_{NEUT-3P-PL} are angry
- f. “*Est ce qu'il y a des gens qui regardaient le Morning Live quand ils/elles/aels étaient petits/petites?*”
Are there people who watched Morning Live when they_{MASC-3P-PL}/they_{FEM-3P-PL}/they_{NEUT-3P-PL} were small/small?
- g. “*MES POTES C'EST DES MAMIES LÀ IELS/AELS DORMENT*”
MY FRIENDS ARE GRANDMAS, THEY_{INCL-3P-PL}/THEY_{NEUT-3P-PL} ARE SLEEPING RIGHTNOW

Looking at the examples above we see that in many cases the hyperinclusivity only concerns (neo-)pronouns (20a, 20b, 20c, 20e, 20g). Taking a closer look at these tweets we say that in these cases the referents seem to be non-binary, either a singular person (20a), or a group of people. On the one hand there is a person's (referent's) choice of pronouns to be used which could lead to sentences like 20a, as non-binary people often use *ael* as well. Tweets like (20b), (20c), (20d), (20e) and (20g) however, indicate that their meaning are perceived as different. It can therefore be assumed that the neo-pronouns *iel(s)* and *ael(s)*, even if they are close in meaning, cannot be used interchangeably.

In this chapter I have turned to the empirical side of this research. I collected data from two platforms in order to provide insights into speaker behaviour in relation to the neo-pronouns at hand. The first corpus was built from Google search results, this corpus did not yield the necessary data to answer the research question. I then compiled 4 other corpora, consisting of tweets containing one of the 4 neo-pronouns under observation. The analysis of the data resulting from this corpus study allowed me to confirm my hypothesis introduced in the previous chapter 2. The neo-pronouns *iel* and *iels* are indeed more frequent than *ael* and *aels*, with the latter being the least frequent. Furthermore, the referent of *ael* is mainly a non-binary person, while *iel* is used for both generic context and specific people. Finally, the number feature of pronominal grammar remains unaffected: the inclusive neo-pronoun *iels* is

used to refer to mixed groups, i.e., multiple people. This is also the case for *aels*, but it occurs only very rarely. Now that we have a representation of how speakers use these neo-pronouns it is possible to model their semantics based on the data presented in this chapter.

4. Modelling Pronominal Grammar: A Presuppositional Account of (Neo-)Pronouns in French

In the previous chapters of this thesis, I have as a first step introduced the societal changes that are introduced in the French language system: the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*. These versions of French stem from different attempts to change the language in a way that it reflects the changes society as a whole has undergone or is undergoing. The *Écriture Inclusive*, as an extension of the Feminisation process of the late 1990's and early 2000's, had as a goal to represent all members of society in language. The *Écriture Neutre* on the other hand, attempts to break with traditional grammatical gender to allow speakers to represent (and include) humans who identify other than man or woman. As a second step, I have turned towards the behaviour of speakers regarding these linguistic phenomena. For this I have collected four corpora of tweets in which one of the four neo-pronouns (*iel*, *iels*, *ael* or *aels*) occurs. The categorization of these tweets based on referent type allows me to formulate the following, informal, meanings of the neo-pronouns in focus in this thesis (Table A).

Table 10

Neo-pronouns and their referents based on corpus data

| Neo-Pronoun | Referent Type |
|-------------|---|
| <i>iel</i> | a nonbinary person or when the gender of the referent is unknown/irrelevant |
| <i>iels</i> | a group of people |
| <i>ael</i> | a nonbinary person |
| <i>aels</i> | a group of people |

These predictions of meanings, together with the traditional pronouns, indicate that the current state of socially motivated language change in French sees the coexistence of three different grammars: Standard French, Inclusive French and Neutral French. These three grammars follow the same mechanism and constraints for pronoun resolution but differ in certain aspects. The subsequent chapter takes a close look at each of the three grammars, starting with Standard French based on which the extensions towards Inclusive and then Neutral French can be built. To model (neo-)pronoun meaning I am working within the Discourse Representation Theory framework (Kamp & Reyle, 1993). Within this framework, pronoun resolution is taken as anaphora resolution, following Burnett & Pozniak, I am however taking a presuppositional approach to pronouns. The first section of this chapter gives a detailed account of the framework, before turning to the three grammars in the following sections.

The grammatical gender system in French is, as presented in chapter 2 of this thesis, mixed. This 'mixed' system is visible in grammatical gender assignment: for inanimate nouns like *fleur* ('flower_{SG-FEM}') or *couteau* ('knife_{SG-MASC}') the gender is purely grammatical, partly depending on morpho-phonetic criteria. For this category of nouns, there is no real-world

influence on the grammatical gender. This is however different for animate nouns, here the grammatical gender relies on the natural (traditionally speaking the biological) gender of the referent, female referents are feminine and masculine referents are masculine, with a few exceptions. The french gender system is thus mixed as it combines formal and semantic criteria for its grammatical gender assignment (a more detailed account can be found in a previous section 2.1. of this thesis).

4.1. The Framework

A pronoun is used to refer to a real-world referent instead of a noun or their name. The feminine third-person singular pronoun *elle* is used for a female referent or a feminine inanimate noun and *il* is the masculine third-person singular pronoun, used for a male referent or a masculine inanimate noun. For example, in the utterance: *Lucie et Louis marchent, elle est plus lente* (Eng. ‘Lucie and Louis are walking, she is slower’) the hearer infers from the third person feminine singular pronoun *elle* (‘she’) that is Lucie who is slower, as Lucie is one woman. With this example we see that a pronoun follows the extra-linguistic conditions introduced by an animate referent: gender and number.’

Traditionally it is considered that a pronoun stands in an anaphoric relationship with its antecedent. Its use helps the hearer to pick out the matching individual from the given context. The pronoun has, in this sense, a context-invariant linguistic meaning: it does not contribute to the truth-conditional content (Hunter, 2013). It only states what is already known: the phi-features of gender and number. As shown above, the traditional French singular pronouns *elle* and *il* provide the hearer with such specifications about the discourse referent. This understanding allows us to take another approach to pronouns, instead of an anaphoric account of pronouns I choose to model the anaphoric meaning in terms of presuppositional content, following Van der Sandt (1992) and Burnett & Pozniak (2021).

The assumption of a pronoun’s semantic contribution being of presuppositional nature might seem as having an effect on the mechanism for the construction of a DRT model. It has however been argued that presupposition projection and anaphora resolution are actually handled by the same mechanisms (Van der Sandt, 1992). Van der Sandt (1992) claims that presuppositions are nothing but anaphors with an internal structure and semantic content which is more descriptive, thus following the same mechanisms as anaphora resolution. He proposes the following definition for a discourse representation space to allow the encoding of embedded anaphoric expressions:

DRS Definition

A DRS K is a triple $\langle U(K), \text{Con}(K), A(K) \rangle$, where

- (i) $U(K)$ is a finite and possibly empty set of discourse referents
- (ii) $\text{Con}(K)$ is a set of simple or complex conditions
- (iii) $A(K)$ is a (possibly empty) set of DRSs

A condition is an expression of the following form:

- (i) If P is an n -place predicate and $u_1 \dots u_n$ are discourse referents, then $P(u_1; \dots; u_n)$ is a simple condition
- (ii) If u_i and u_j are discourse referents then $u_i = u_j$ is a simple condition
- (iii) If K and k' are DRSs, then $\neg K$, $K \rightarrow K'$ and $K \vee K'$ are complex conditions

(Van der Sandt, 1992, p. 354)

The procedure provided by Van der Sandt (1992) takes a bottom-up and indirect construction mechanism in which a first provisional DRS based on syntactic parsing is constructed. This provisional DRS is seen as an auxiliary construct which will later merge with the incoming DRS after the construction procedure is finalised. This account affirms a separate encoding of anaphoric expressions (and thus presuppositions) in the so-called A-structure, in which all the anaphoric elements are collected. In Van der Sandt's account (1992) a proper DRS has no unresolved anaphoric expressions and is made of three different components: the universe of the discourse referents ($U(K)$), a set of conditions ($Con(K)$) and the A-structure ($A(K)$). This account further claims that each anaphor can itself be embedded in another anaphoric expression, the members of the A-structure are themselves a DRS, making the A-structure a set of DRSs. The correct interpretation of a sentence requires the processing of the deepest embedded anaphora. To illustrate the function of this A-structure I am taking Van der Sandt's example in (21) below.

(21)

a. John's cat purrs.

b. b. {

\emptyset , {purr(x)},

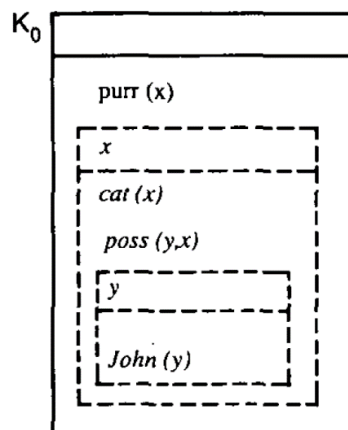
{ { {x}, {cat(x), poss(x,y)},

{ { {y}, {John(y)},

\emptyset } \mapsto }

}

c.



(Van der Sandt, 1992, pp. 354-355)

The example (21b) above presents the construction algorithm associated with the sentence in (21a), (21c) then demonstrates the pictorial representation of this sentences. The dotted boxes

indicate the members of the A-structure, in which the anaphoric material (italicized) is found. The resolution of the A-structure requires two stages: in a first step the DRS for the incoming sentence is constructed, this DRS is then merged with the main DRS resulting in the a new DRS in which the anaphoric structures are still waiting to be processed. It is only after the merging that these structures are resolved against the content of the new DRS producing a proper DRS. The resolution of the anaphora is thus a partial function obeying the standard constraints of accessibility, which regulates the projection of presuppositional material through the DRSs. Additionally, there is a distinction between the local domain ($U(K)$) and the accessible domain of an anaphoric DRS ($Acc(K)$). The latter is part of some A-structure and is the set off all referents accessible from the elements of the local domain. The tree-structure of the DRSs which extends inside the A-structure is achieved through the process of subordination. Finally, the projection line allows us to see the route taken by an anaphor when projected to a higher position in a DRS. The initial definitions have to be extended to allow the contribution of A-structures. Expanding on this surpasses the scope of this thesis, or a more detailed explanation of the merging process, subordination and accessibility for the formation of a proper DRS see Van der Sandt, 1992, pp. 355-357. The resolution of an anaphoric expression is a complex function moving from DRSs to DRSs either via the processes of binding by identifying the antecedent from which all the conditions are transferred, or of accommodation (if no suitable antecedent is found). Once this process is completed for every A-structure in a DRS reach a ‘proper DRS’, a DRS with an empty A-structure (Van der Sandt, 1992). With this presuppositional approach to pronoun meaning the treatment of pronouns does not change fundamentally, the mechanisms for pronoun resolution remain the same, as shown in the following sections.

4.2. Standard French

As previously discussed, the French grammatical gender system is mixed assigning nouns either a feminine (f) or masculine (m) gender based on different criteria. In Standard French inanimate nouns, these are purely grammatical: a noun receives its gender from certain morpho-phonetic features (Corbett, 1991). Animate nouns infer their grammatical gender from the so-called ‘natural gender’: the biological sex of the referent. The latter is also divided into female (feminine) and male (masculine) in traditional western societies. We can thus define grammatical gender in Standard French as follows:

$$\begin{aligned} N_{\text{inanimate}} \text{ Gender}(x) \mid N &= \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}} \\ N_{\text{human}} \text{ Gender}(x) \mid N &= \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}} \end{aligned}$$

The definition above transcribes the grammatical gender assignment rules for inanimate nouns and a subgroup of animate nouns, namely humans. The analysis of the corpora allows me to assume that the use of neo-pronouns is only relevant in the context of human referents, which is why the discussion of other animate nouns is superfluous.

In Standard French nouns are thus either feminine or masculine, regardless if they are inanimate or animate. This feature is transposed onto adjectives as well as pronouns who share

the same antecedent. The focus of this thesis lies on pronoun meaning and resolution, which is what I will delve into. The topic of pronouns in DRT has been already addressed by Kamp & Reyle (1993) during the establishing of the framework as well as Corblin (2002) who applies it to the French language. The latter proposes the following construction rule for French Pronouns:

CONSTRUCTION RULE FOR FRENCH PRONOUNS

Analysis of the structure: $S = X - \text{Pronoun} - Y$

Analysis of the DRSp: $U = \{x_1; x_2; \dots; x_n\}$ and $C = \{C_1; C_2; \dots; C_n\}$

Construction:

1. Introduce a discourse referent x_{n+1} into the universe U .
2. Introduce into the Conditions C , a condition of the form $x_{n+1} = x_u$ where x_u is a suitable referent pertaining to U .
3. Replace S *pronoun* by x_{n+1}

(Corblin, 2002, p.19)

Corblin's construction rule requires the antecedent to be introduced into the DRS by a previous linguistic expression. Such a setup is however not necessarily the case in a discourse. Especially looking at the data collected in the corpora we see cases where the antecedent is inferred rather than explicitly mentioned. For these antecedents which are not available Van der Sandt (1992) proposes the inferential process of accommodation. The construction rule for pronouns above might seem viable at a first glance but upon further investigation one can notice that the definition given by Corblin (2002) does not discuss the relevancy of gender for these formal criteria. As Burnett & Pozniak (2021) point out, a pronoun designates a function returning an individual (or object) provided that individual (or object) has the required property indicated by the pronoun. In their work, they assume that the semantic contributions of a French pronoun are represented as a presupposition on the pronoun (Burnett & Pozniak, 2021). The central semantic contribution and thus required property of a French pronoun is the referent's gender: *elle* ('she_{SING-FEM}') for a feminine noun and *il* ('he_{SING-MASC}') for a masculine noun. The presupposition carried by a pronoun thus indicates thus the gender of the referent. Furthermore, there is an important aspect of the system of grammatical gender in French. Adopting this presuppositional approach for pronouns allows me to formulate the following predictions for the meaning of traditional singular French pronouns:

(22)

$$\llbracket elle \rrbracket = \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f] \vee [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = f]$$

$$\llbracket il \rrbracket = \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m] \vee [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = m]$$

The predictions in (22) above inform us of the previously mentioned properties relevant for pronoun resolution. In order to use the pronoun *elle*, the referent has to be of feminine natural gender if the referent is human or of feminine grammatical gender if the referent is not human. This also holds true for *il*, where the referent has to be of masculine natural gender if the

referent is human or of masculine grammatical gender is the referent is non-human. Standard French relies on grammatical gender for pronoun resolution. For inanimate nouns grammatical as their grammatical gender assignment relies on morpho-pomological features. In the case of animate nouns grammatical gender requires natural gender in order to assign grammatical gender.

The above predictions highlight important constraint for pronoun resolution that is not found in Corblin's (2002) construction rule in (22): the condition on the relation between the real-world antecedent and the pronoun. This relation requires the antecedent's gender to be matching with gender marker on the pronoun. This requirement is also represented on Kamp and Reyle (1993) where they resume the conditions in the construction rules A and B.

A. "a condition of the form $\text{Gen}(\alpha) = \beta$ where α is the new discourse referent and β is the gender value of the NP-node in the local configuration which triggers the rule application." (Kamp & Reyle, 1993, p. 71)

and

B. "a condition of the form $\alpha = \beta$, where α is the new discourse referent and β is a discourse referent already in the DRS, such that: $\text{Gen}(\alpha) = \text{Gen}(\beta)$ " (Kamp & Reyle, 1993, p. 71)

The modified construction rule for french pronouns combining Kamp & Reyles (1993) and Corblin (2002) looks then as follows:

MODIFIED CONSTRUCTION RULE FOR FRENCH PRONOUNS

Analysis of the structure: $S = X - \text{Pronoun} - Y$

Analysis of the DRSp: $U = \{x_1; x_2; \dots; x_n\}$ and $C = \{C_1; C_2; \dots; C_n\}$

Construction:

1. Introduce a discourse referent x_{n+1} into the universe U .
2. Introduce into the Conditions C , a condition of the form $x_{n+1} = x_u$ where x_u is a suitable referent pertaining to U , such that $\text{Gender}(x_{n+1}) = \text{Gender}(x_u)$
3. Replace S *pronoun* by x_{n+1}

The modified construction rule above states not only the necessary connection between the discourse referent x_{n+1} and its antecedent x_u , but further adds the condition that the antecedent' (social) gender matches the discourse referent's (or pronoun's) grammatical gender. The treatment of pronouns carrying presuppositional content thus allows us to add the additional and essential condition for grammatical gender marker. The application of these construction roles within the DRT are presented in the following subsections.

4.2.1. Inanimate Nouns

The process of pronoun resolution from a presuppositional account is quite similar to the traditional, anaphoric account. The construction rule for pronouns with an inanimate noun as an antecedent follows the construction rule introduced in the previous section (4.1.) repeated below.

Construction rule for French pronouns with an inanimate antecedent

Analysis of the structure: $S = X - \mathbf{Pronoun} - Y$

Analysis of the DRSp: $\mathbf{U} = \{x_1; x_2; \dots; x_n\}$ and $\mathbf{C} = \{C_1; C_2; \dots; C_n\}$

Construction:

1. Introduce a discourse referent x_{n+1} into the universe \mathbf{U} .
2. Introduce into the Conditions \mathbf{C} , a condition of the form $x_{n+1} = x_u$ where x_u is a suitable referent pertaining to \mathbf{U} , such that $\text{Gender}(x_{n+1}) = \text{Gender}(x_u)$
3. Replace S *pronoun* by x_{n+1}

Furthermore, the gender condition ($\text{Gender}(x_{n+1}) = \text{Gender}(x_u)$), necessary for the successful execution of this process, rely on the gender prediction for pronouns. These are, when the real-world referent is an inanimate (non-human) object the following:

$\llbracket elle \rrbracket = \exists x [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = f]$

$\llbracket il \rrbracket = \exists x [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = m]$

To illustrate this process, let us take the following sentence (23):

(23)

Un livre est lourd. Il est vieux.

$A_{\text{MASC-SG}} \text{book}_{\text{MASC-SG}} \text{be}_{3\text{P-SG}} \text{heavy} \text{He}_{\text{MASC-SG}} \text{be}_{3\text{P-SG}} \text{old}$

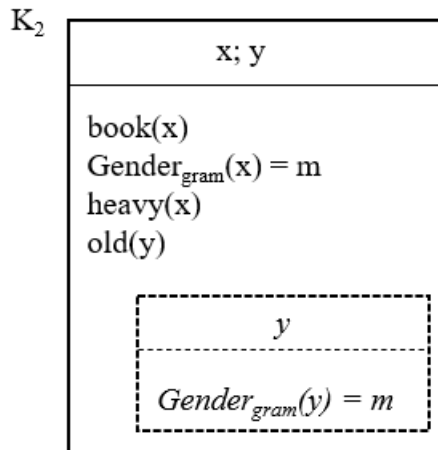
The book is heavy. It is old.

As a first step, let us model the first sentence: *Un livre est lourd* ('A book is heavy').

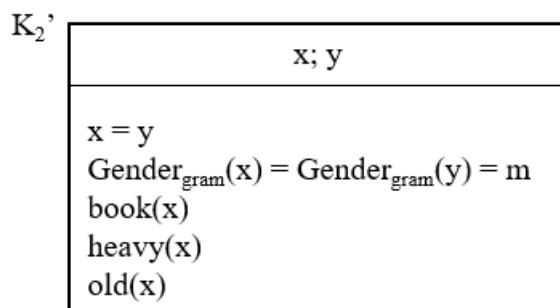
K_1

| |
|---|
| x |
| $\text{book}(x)$ $\text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = m$ $\text{heavy}(x)$ |

The DRS for this sentence (K_1) is fairly simple: it indicates the elements of the utterance and the gender subject. K_0 introduces a discourse referent x , which is a book ($\mathbf{book}(x)$), whose grammatical gender is masculine ($\mathbf{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = m$) and which is heavy ($\mathbf{heavy}(x)$). Now let us add the second sentence *Il est vieux* ('He is old.')



In the following DRS (K_2) we see the previously introduced information (the book being heavy) as well as the introduction of a new referent y , which is old (**old**(y)). This new discourse referent indicates the pronoun *il*. As stated above, the use of this pronouns carries a presuppositional information: that about the discourse referent's gender (**Gender**(y) = m), which is masculine. This presupposition is represented with the dotted boxes. We now turn to the construction rules for pronoun: **Gender**(y) = **Gender**(x), the gender of the pronoun (y) thus has to match the gender of the antecedent (x). For the sentences in 23 this applies: *un livre* and *il* both are masculine, thus follow the construction rule and we can establish *le livre* as the antecedent of *il*, the final DRS for 23 then looks as follows:



The DRS K_2' shows the relation between the pronoun *il* (y) and its antecedent *le livre* (x) following the established grammatical gender condition, as well as the fact that the properties 'heavy' (*lourd*) and 'old' (*vieux*) of the same referent.

4.1.2. Animate Nouns

The preceding section focuses on inanimate French nouns, I am now turning to animate and human nouns. The workings for this category remain the same and the construction rule here, is the same as the one previously introduced for inanimate nouns, what changes however is the predictions for the pronouns. Illustrated below:

$$\llbracket \textit{elle} \rrbracket = \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = f]$$

$$\llbracket \textit{il} \rrbracket = \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = m]$$

In contrast with inanimate nouns, the gender here is inferred from the real-world referent's natural (or biological) gender (Corbett, 1991), and these nouns carry another feature: 'human', to indicate that we are dealing with animate, mostly human referents. As before with inanimate nouns we are again dealing with grammatical gender, the difference lies only in the type of assignment. Take for example the following sentences (24): *femme* ('woman') is of feminine grammatical gender which is anchored in the real world by its antecedent which is of female natural gender.

(24)

Une femme est studieuse. Elle est intelligente.

$A_{\text{FEM-SG}} \text{ woman}_{\text{FEM-SG}} \text{ be}_{\text{3P-SG}} \text{ studious} \quad \text{She}_{\text{FEM-SG}} \text{ be}_{\text{3P-SG}} \text{ intelligent}$

The woman is studious. She is intelligent.

The sentences in (24) above are of the same construction than the previously modelled ones containing an inanimate noun (23). As before, we start by modelling the DRS for the first sentence: *Une femme est studieuse* ('A woman is studious').

K₁

| |
|--|
| x |
| woman(x) $\text{Gender}_{\text{gram}} = \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f$ studious(x) |

The DRS K₁ presents us with a discourse referent **x** which is a woman (**woman(x)**) unlike the inanimate noun in the previous example, here the noun's grammatical gender aligns with the biological sex (or natural gender) of the referent, a woman (*femme*) is female, so the gender is feminine, the referent's gender is thus not grammatical but natural (**Gender_{gram}(x) = Gender_{nat}(x) = f**). We furthermore see that this discourse referent has the property studious (**studious(x)**). Let us now move on to the second sentence, *Elle est intelligente* ('She is intelligent').

K₂

| |
|--|
| x; y |
| woman(x) $\text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f$ studious(x) intelligent(y) |
| <div style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 5px; margin: 10px auto; width: 80%;"> y $\text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(y) = \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f$ </div> |

The addition of this sentence, introduces a new discourse referent into the DRS: the pronoun *elle* ('she_{FEM}'), represented by **y**. As with the preceding example, the pronoun carries a presupposition indicating its gender (**Gender_{gram}(y) = Gender_{nat}(y) = f**), represented in the dotted box. Again, consulting the construction rules, we can see that the discourse referents **x**

and y share the same gender. The noun *femme* ('woman') thus carries the property required by the pronoun *elle* for it to be a suitable antecedent: it is an animate noun carrying the feminine grammatical gender feature which aligns with the natural gender of its referent: *femme* refers to a female adult human. The genders of the noun and the pronoun thus coincide allowing us to assume that *la femme* is the antecedent of the pronoun *elle*.

K_2'

| |
|---|
| $x; y$ |
| $x = y$ $\text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(y) = f$ woman(x) studious(x) intelligent(x) |

The final DRS, K_2' , illustrates the matching genders of the discourse referents x (*femme* ('woman')) and y (*elle* ('she')) ($\text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(y) = f$) as well as the fact that these referents are actually one and the same ($y=x$). It further shows the properties the discourse referent exhibits (*studieuse* (**studious(x)**) and *intelligente* (**intelligent(x)**)).

As mentioned in the first chapter of this thesis, the masculine pronoun *il* fulfils another role than that of refereeing to male animate nouns or masculine inanimate nouns. The masculine is traditionally used in generic contexts, presupposing a neutrality in this context. The process for pronoun resolution in these context is the same, but even if we are dealing with animate nouns or human referent, agreement here is grammatical. I will illustrate this by modelling the sentences in (25) below.

- (25)
- Quelqu'un vient. Il est en retard.*
 Someone_{MASC-SG} come_{3P-SG} He_{MASC-SG} be_{3P-SG} in lateness
 Someone is coming. They are late.

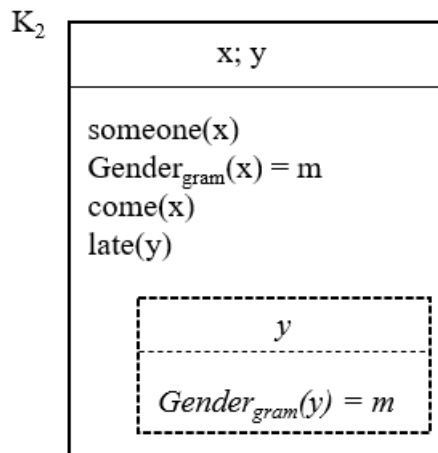
In the example (XX) below, we are informed that someone is coming, but we do not know who (or the gender of the person). Standard French does not have a neutral pronoun, so the 'generic masculine' comes into play and the masculine pronoun *il* ('he') is used. Let us now model the first sentence.

K_1

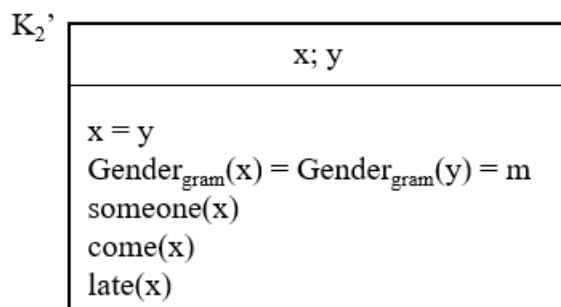
| |
|---|
| x |
| someone(x) $\text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = m$ come(x) |

In the first DRS K_1 we see the introduction of a discourse referent x who is a person (**Someone(x)**) that is coming (**come(x)**). Here, even though we have an animate, human

referent the gender is grammatical ($\mathbf{Gender}_{gram}(x) = m$) and not inferred from the referent's natural gender. Let us now add the following sentence *Il est en retard* ('He is late').



With the addition of the second sentence in the DRS K_2 we see the introduction of a new discourse referent y (*il*). This referent is late ($\mathbf{late}(y)$) and carries a gender presupposition ($\mathbf{Gender}_{gram}(y) = m$), here again the gender is grammatical as we are not inferring it from a human referent. As in the previous examples we see that the gender of the referents x and y match (both are masculine), thus satisfying the condition for pronoun resolution.



In order to complete the pronoun resolution, we followed the pronoun's projection line up and were able to find a suitable referent which matches the gender conditions. The last DRS K_1' illustrates the matching grammatical gender of the two discourse referents ($\mathbf{Gender}_{gram}(x) = \mathbf{Gender}_{gram}(y) = m$) and informs us that they are indeed referring to the same person ($x=y$). It is thus the same person that is coming and that is late. In this example, we do not have a natural gender of a referent to infer the gender from, Standard French therefore uses the masculine (*il* ('he')) supposedly stripped from its real-world male connotation and allowing the hearer to imagine the person coming to be of any gender, not just male.

In this section we have taken a closer look into the mechanism of pronoun resolution in Standard French. Starting with inanimate nouns before turning to animate and human nouns, I have established, by merging the works of Kamp & Reyle (1993) Corblin (2002), Van der Sandt (1992) and Burnett & Pozniak (2021), a presuppositional account for the resolution of the traditional pronouns *elle* and *il*, following the gender constraints based on previously formulated semantics of these pronouns. An important observation resulting from these models

is the alignment between grammatical and natural gender in the case of animate and human nouns. The DRT models in 4.2.1. and 4.2.2. rely on the matching gender features of pronoun and antecedent: to argue for these two discourse referents to share the same real-world referent and thus antecedent they require matching gender features. In case of inanimate nouns, these are purely grammatical, while animate or human nouns get their gender assigned from the referent's natural gender.

Standard French has two third person plural pronouns: *elles* ('they_{FEM-PL}') and *ils* ('they_{MASC-PL}'). At a first glance these seem to be the plural counterpart of the singular third person pronouns *elle* ('she_{FEM-SG}') and *il* ('he_{MASC-SG}'): the masculine *ils* would be used for a group of men and the feminine *elles* would be used for a group of women. While this is partially correct the situation is more complex. The feminine third person plural pronoun *elles* is indeed used to refer to a group of women, this is actually a requirement for the use of this pronoun. The other, the masculine third person plural pronoun *ils* however, does not follow this same requirement: it requires a group of people where at least one member is a man. This creates a first issue for speakers who aimed for a more equal French society: no matter the distribution, the pronoun used to refer to a mixed group is always the masculine *ils*.

(26)

Let us assume a set Y

$$\llbracket \textit{elles} \rrbracket = \forall x \in Y [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f] \vee [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = f]$$

$$\llbracket \textit{ils} \rrbracket = \exists x \in Y [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m] \vee [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = m]$$

The semantics of feminine *elles* in (26) inform us that all members of the set (Y) are of feminine gender, in the case of animate or human referents, this informs us of the referent's natural gender or in the case of inanimate referents about its grammatical gender. The masculine pronoun *ils* on the other hand requires only one member of the set (Y) to be of masculine gender, again, this indicates the referent's natural gender if the referent is animate or human, while in the case of inanimate referents it indicates its grammatical gender. This creates a first issue for speakers who aimed for a more equal French society: no matter the distribution, the pronoun used to refer to a mixed group, animate or inanimate is always the masculine *ils*.

In Standard French the masculine third person plural pronoun *ils* is thus used sex-specifically for men and generically when referring to mixed groups. This has been argued to invisibilize women. For example, when talking about a group of students: *C'était les étudiants, ils étaient bruyants*. ('It was the students_{MASC-PL}, they_{MASC-PL} were noisy') only the male students are explicitly mentioned, leading to a linguistic underrepresentation of the feminine thus women. Furthermore, when there is no knowledge about the gender of the referent(s) or in a context where the gender is irrelevant Standard French makes use of the so-called 'generic masculine'. In a sentence like *Tout le monde fait ce qu'il veut* ('Everyone does what he_{MASC-SG} wants'), the gender of the referent is unknown as it refers to anyone, it is a requisite in Standard French to use the masculine. As mentioned in an earlier chapter the

generic masculine is argued to be neutral and not carry the ‘male’ connotation. The greater use of the masculine *ils* compared the feminine *elles* in mixed group or generic contexts is however far from neutral, psycholinguistic studies have shown that speakers still associate *ils* with men and do not see it as neutral as claimed by its defendants. In order to avoid this overuse of the masculine pronoun, French speakers working towards a more inclusive French language created the neo-pronoun *iel(s)*, a combination of the traditional binary pronouns *elle(s)* and *il(s)*.

4.3. Inclusive French

The first public debate about grammatical gender arose in the context of profession nouns. With the féminisation efforts of the early 2000’s feminine counterparts for previously only masculine profession nouns were created. This lexical solution to the translation of the emancipation and fight for equal rights of women did and does not disrupt the grammatical gender system of the French language. The new noun forms follow the binary categorization of feminine and masculine and also do not change anything for pronoun resolution. The creation of these feminine counterparts marks the beginning of a second French Grammar system: Inclusive French with its neo-pronoun *iel(s)*. The inclusive aspect of this new word forms is very well seen as it carries morphological reminders of the masculine *il* and the feminine *elle*.

4.3.1. Plural *iels*

Inclusive French, as argued in first chapter of this thesis, is an extension of the Feminisation movement of the early 2000’s. traditionally masculine profession nouns such as *ministre* (‘minister’) or *auteur* (‘author’) did not change or even disappear, rather feminine counterparts like *autrice* (‘author_{FEM}’) were created. These new wordforms follow the grammatical gender constraints of Standard French: they infer their gender from their referent’s natural gender, thus highlighting natural gender and putting it in the centre of the gender system (previously mentioned in 4.2.2.). The creation of these new feminine profession nouns made however way for another conflict regarding grammatical gender in relation to humans in the French language: that of the plural and the generic masculine (as discussed in 1.1. and the previous section 3.2.2.). As presented in the previous section, plural pronouns in Standard French require to commit to one of the grammatical genders. While the feminine counterparts of profession nouns in the singular allow for the lexeme and natural gender to align, this is not the case for the plural. As illustrated above, speakers have to resort to the generic masculine. The aversion of this sparked the creation of the neo-pronoun *iel(s)*. This pronoun is restricted to human referents.¹⁷ Based on the analysis of Corpus 3 in 3.2.4., we see that this neo-pronoun is almost exclusively used in a plural context referring to multiple people (a group). These groups are either known by the speaker to be made up of multiple genders such as *mes parents* (‘my parents’) or generic but assumed to be portably consisting of different genders, such as

¹⁷ It appears however noteworthy to point out that in the created corpora there has been at least one occurrence of a neo-pronoun used for a non-human but inanimate referent: to refer to a group of kittens. This seems to be due to the anthropomorphizing of domestic animals like cats and dogs and thus touches upon a different topic lying outside the scope of this thesis.

les dermatologues ('the dermatologists'). The semantics of the plural neo-pronoun *iels* can thus be defined as follows:

(27)

Let us assume a set Y

$[[iels]] = \exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f]$

The semantics of the neo-pronoun *iels* above shows that the use of this pronoun informs us that the group is composed of two different members, at least one of masculine natural gender and at least another, different one of feminine natural gender. The neo-pronoun thus offers a solution for the problem created by the existence of two plural pronouns each tied to a specific sex or gender. It proposes a third lexical option which allows the speaker to avoid the commitment to a specific gender and include everyone on the same level in mixed group contexts. The neo-pronoun's ability to be used in both a generic and specific context is an important aspect. One can use *iels* when referring to a group of people knowing that there are multiple genders presents or a group of people where they suppose multiple genders are present but do not know for certain. Both of these uses are illustrated below, with examples from the collected corpus that have been slightly modified for simplicity's sake.

(28)

a. *Les parents d'A¹⁸ font peur, iels vont avoir une conv¹⁹*
 The_{PL} parents_{SPL} of A do_{3P-PL} fear they_{INCL-PL} go_{3P-PL} have a conversation
 A's parents are scary, they will have a conversation

b. *des gens insistent sur une vision romantisée du grand amour.*
 the_{PL} people_{PL} insist_{3P-PL} ON a vision romanticized of big love
iels seront jamais satisfait.e.s.
 they_{INCL-PL} will never satisfied_{INCL-PL}
 the people who insist on a romanticized view on love [...] they will never be satisfied
 by their relationships

The example of *iels* in (28a) shows the use of this neo-pronoun to refer to a group of people which is made up of different genders which the speaker is aware of: traditionally speaking, parents are two people, a man and a woman, the speaker therefore could not commit to either gender as both are (most likely to be) present. The use of *iels* in (28b) on the other hand illustrates its generic use: here the speaker talks about people who have a romanticized view on love, they are not referring to any specific people but rather to an abstract group of people, which we assume is made up of different genders. The speaker thus does not want to commit to either of the binary genders as they do not and cannot know if these people are all either of masculine natural gender or feminine natural gender. In order to fully understand these two examples from (28) let us model their respective DRSs.

¹⁸ Name redacted for privacy

¹⁹ Short for *conversation* (eng 'conversation')

The process for the resolution of neo-pronouns in (28) is the same as the ones illustrated in the previous section with the traditional (singular) pronouns *il* and *elle*. To model this, I follow Kamp & Reyles (1993) and again, let us start with the first clause of the sentence: *Les parents d'A * me font peur* ('A's parents scare me').

K₁

| |
|---|
| X |
| A's parents(X) $\text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(\mathbf{X}) = \exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f]$ scary(X) |

In the DRS K₁ above, the new discourse referent *x* is introduced. **A's parents(X)** indicates that **X** stands for the set consisting of the (two) people making up A's parents (most likely a man and a woman, illustrated by **Gender_{nat}(X) = $\exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f]$**) and **scary(X)** asserts that this action is carried out by said set. Now we can turn to the second clause in the sentence: *ils vont avoir une conv* ('they will have a conversation').

K₂

| |
|---|
| X; Y |
| A's parents(X) $\text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(\mathbf{X}) = \exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f]$ scary(X) have a conversation(Y) |
| <div style="border: 1px dashed black; padding: 5px; margin: 10px auto; width: 80%;"> Y $\text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(\mathbf{Y}) = \exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f]$ </div> |

Just like in the previous example, we see in the DRS K₂ above the introduction of a new discourse referent **Y**. This discourse referent also carries a presupposition of gender: **Gender_{nat}(Y) = $\exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f]$** . We again have to choose a suitable antecedent that follows the same gender constraints. As said before feature 'inclusive' requires the set to have a masculine and a feminine member. Following its projection line up we encounter **A's parents(X)**. Traditionally, parents are two people, a man and a woman, **X** thus carries the feature **Gender_{nat}(X) = $\exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f]$** . Again, the grammatical gender constraints for pronouns, Gender(y) = Gender(x) are respected and allow for pronoun resolution. We can now construct the DRS, K₂'.

K₂'

| X; Y |
|---|
| $X = y$ $\text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(X) = \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(Y) = \exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f]$ A's parents(X) scary(X) have a conversation(X) |

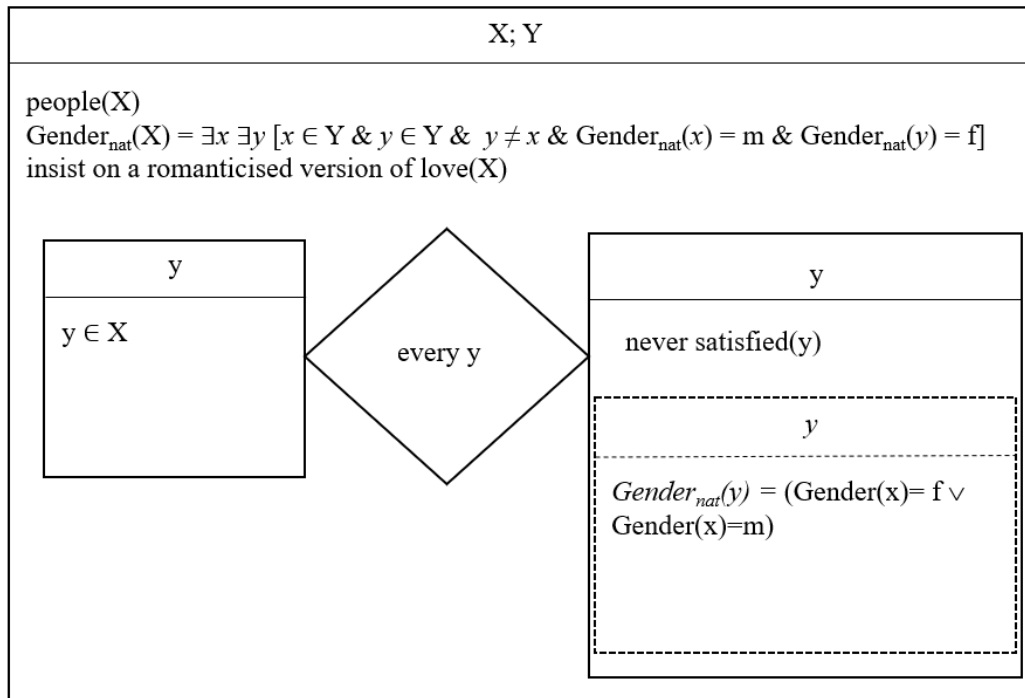
As before, for the DRS K₂', we followed the projection line of the neo-pronoun up to find the perfect match for the presuppositional content (gender) in the antecedent

Turning now to the sentence in (28b), we take a look at the first clause: *des gens insistent sur une vision romantisée du grand amour* ('people insist on a romanticized version of love').

K₁

| X |
|--|
| people(X) $\text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(X) = \exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f]$ insist on a romanticised version of love(X) |

In the DRs K₁ above, a first discourse referent is introduced: **people(X)** indicates that **X** stands for the set consisting of these people (*gens*) and **insist on a romanticized version of love(X)** asserts that this action is carried out by said set **X**. To show that this action is taken out by all members of the set the representation is shown in K₀' below. Furthermore, we can see that *les gens* ('the people_{PL}') is a set of people that is very likely to contain at least one man and one woman ($\text{Gender}(x) = \exists x \in Y : \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \wedge \ \exists y \in Y : y \neq x \ \wedge \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f$). After establishing the DRS for the first part of the sentence, we turn to the second clause: *iels seront jamais satisfait.e.s* ('they will never be satisfied').

K₂

In the example above, we see the second clause introduces a new discourse referent **y** which is carrying a presupposition of gender (**Gender(y) = (Gender(x)= f ∨ Gender(x)=m)**), this antecedent is a part of the set X previously introduced (**y ∈ X**). This gender feature is that of singular iel, as we are dealing with a quantificational context and thus a bound variable. A detailed explanation of iel is presented in the next section. We now have to then pick a suitable antecedent from the accessible antecedents, suitable in the sense that it follows the gender constraints stating that **Gender(Y) = Gender(X)**. This new discourse referent carries the grammatical gender feature ‘inclusive’; this feature has to agree with that of the antecedent. The feature ‘inclusive’ requires the set to have a masculine and a feminine member, furthermore, we find our self in the plural, the pronouns denote a set. The neo-pronoun’s gender feature is therefore: **Gender(Y) = ∃x ∈ Y : Gender_{nat}(x) = m ^ ∃y ∈ Y : y ≠ x ^ Gender_{nat}(y) = f**, as it refers to a set of all the people that are never satisfied. Following its projection line up we encounter *les gens* (‘the people’). This NP carries a similar presupposition: we do not know the actual gender of the people covered by the term ‘gens’ but we can assume there to be at least one man and one woman (**Gender(X) = ∃x ∈ Y : Gender_{nat}(x) = m ^ ∃y ∈ Y : y ≠ x ^ Gender_{nat}(y) = f**), it thus respects the grammatical gender constraints for pronouns, **Gender(x) = Gender(y)** and thus the pronoun resolution. Based on this we can then construct the second DRS, K₂’.

K_2'

| |
|--|
| X; Y |
| $X = y$ $\text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(X) = \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(Y) = \exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x$ $\quad \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f]$ people(X) insist on a romanticised version of love(X) never satisfied(X) |

In the DRS K_2' above, we followed the projection line of the neo-pronoun (*iels*) up to find the perfect match for the presuppositional content (gender) in the antecedent equating y with X .

This neo-pronoun is however not only used in its plural form (*iels*) but also in its singular form: *iel*.

4.3.2. Singular *iel*

In the corpus presented in the preceding chapter we saw that singular *iel* is rather common. Its meaning can be inferred from the plural counterpart. As introduced above, plural *iels* indicates that the group of people contains at least a man and a woman, this can be a fact (as in actual mixed groups, such as the example of parents given in 28a) or an assumption in the case of generic contexts. The singular counter part of this neo-pronoun thus has the following meaning: it refers to either a feminine or masculine entity without the speaker committing themselves to one or the other, due to different reasons. This meaning can be represented as follows:

$$(29) \quad \llbracket iel \rrbracket = [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ [(\text{Gender}(x)=f \ \vee \ \text{Gender}(x)=m)]]]$$

There are two important differences between the semantics of *elle* and *il* presented in 4.2., and the semantics (29) For the neo-pronoun grammatical gender is put in the background: in order to infer the gender, the pronoun relies on the referent's natural gender. Furthermore, the neo-pronoun represents the non-commitment to one gender of the other which lies at the origin of this neo-pronoun. The traditional pronouns *elle* and *il* inform us, with a certain certainty about the referent's (natural) gender, an information that *iel* tries to keep vague on purpose. This neo-pronoun thus aims to avoid the overrepresentation for the masculine to the detriment of the feminine. The corpus collected during this thesis indicates that, similarly to the plural *iels*, *iel* can be used in two different contexts: in a specific or a generic context. The former refers to a situation where the referent is a specific person (or group such as parents in 27a): in order to avoid commitment to either of the binary genders. The latter on the other hand refers to a generic or abstract person (or group such as in 27b). These two contexts are illustrated with again modified examples from corpus 1 in (30) below.

- (30)
*Une personne est handi.e*²⁰. *Iel fait une crise.* ASG-FEM
 person be_{3P-SG} handicapped_{INCL-SG} They_{INCL-SG} do_{3P-SG} an attack
 A person is handicapped They had an attack.

In example (30) the neo-pronoun does not refer to a specific person but rather a generic one, the speaker is not talking about a specific person but a generic one.

Let us now model the respective DRSs for the example (30): *Une personne est handi.e.* ('a person is handicapped'). This mechanism is the same for the generic use of the singular neo-pronoun *iel*.

K_1

| x |
|--|
| person(x) $\text{Gender}(x) = \exists x : \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \vee \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f$ handicapped(x) |

In the DRS K_1 above we see that the subject **Person(x)** carries the following gender feature: **Gender(x) = $\exists x \in X : \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f \vee \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m$** , this is because *une personne* ('a person') can be anybody, a man or a woman. This person is handicapped (**handicapped(x)**). Now let us add the following sentence: *Iel fait une crise* ('they are having an attack').

K_2

| $x; y$ |
|---|
| person(x) $\text{Gender}(x) = \exists x : \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \vee \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f$ handicapped(x) have an attack(y) |
| y |
| $\text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(y) \exists x : \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \vee \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f$ |

Here again we see the introduction of a new discourse referent **y** who carries a presupposition of gender: **Gender(y) = $\exists x \in X : \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f \vee \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m$** . On our search for a suitable antecedent, we follow the projection line up and encounter **Person(x)** which has the same gender feature thus satisfying the condition $\text{Gender}(x) = \text{Gender}(w)$, which allows us to equate w with x . The final DRS K_1 thus looks as follows.

²⁰ Short for *handicappé/e* ('handicapped')

| | |
|--------|---|
| K_2' | <div style="text-align: center; border-bottom: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;">$x; y$</div> $x = y$ $\text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = \exists x : \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \vee \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m$ $\text{person}(x)$ $\text{handicapped}(x)$ $\text{have an attack}(y)$ |
|--------|---|

The main difference with the example using the generic masculine in 4.2.2. is that we are here not basing the pronoun resolution on grammatical gender, like before but on natural gender. The use of the singular *iel* allows speakers to not commit to one binary gender or the other in situation where neither would be matching the referent's natural gender for certain also opens the door for another socially motivated development in the French grammatical gender system.

The neo-pronoun *iel* is also often found in relation to a non-binary referent. While emerging from an attempted to neutralize generic contexts it is often used to refer to a specific person whose gender lies outside the gender binary. From the corpus analysis presented in chapter 3 we can see that this usage of *iel* is very common, I am therefore going to model (31) below which makes use of this neo-pronoun in such a context it in order to take these occurrences properly into account as well.

- (31)
- A^{21} *est*²² *pas bi, iel* *est* *aroace*²³
- A be_{3P-SG} not bi they_{INCL-SG} be_{3P-SG} aroace
- A is not bi, they are aroace

Here we see that *iel* refers to the subject of the previous clause: A. The speaker thus knows who they are talking about, and we can assume they know the referent's gender identity. The first step is again to model the first clause of (31): *A est pas bi* ('A is not bi').

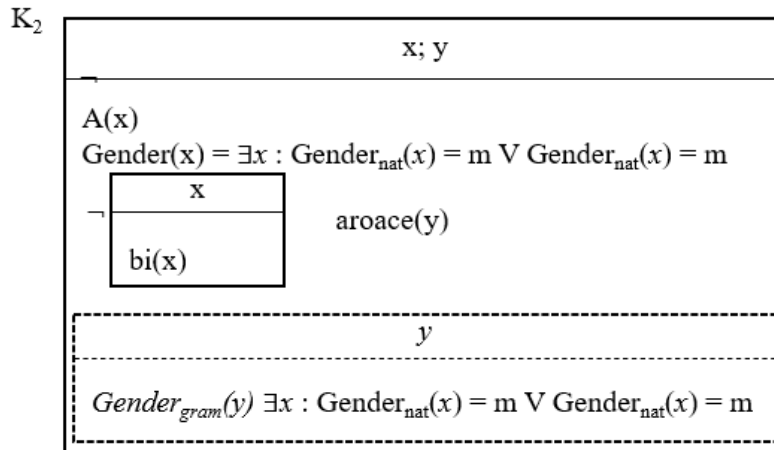
| | | | | |
|----------------|--|-----|--------|----------------|
| K_1 | <div style="text-align: center; border-bottom: 1px solid black; margin-bottom: 5px;">x</div> $A(x)$ $\text{Gender}(x) = \exists x : \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \vee \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m$ <table border="1" style="margin-left: 20px; margin-top: 10px;"> <tr> <td style="text-align: center; padding: 2px;">x</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center; padding: 2px;">\neg</td> </tr> <tr> <td style="text-align: center; padding: 2px;">$\text{bi}(x)$</td> </tr> </table> | x | \neg | $\text{bi}(x)$ |
| x | | | | |
| \neg | | | | |
| $\text{bi}(x)$ | | | | |

²¹ Name redacted for privacy

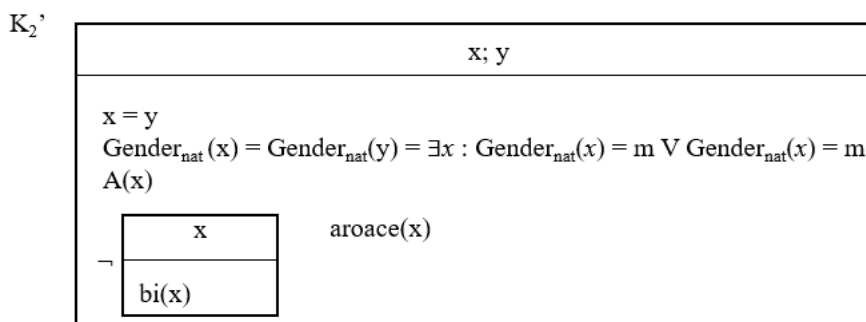
²² In the original tweet *est* ('is') contains a typo which is corrected here

²³ Short for: aromantic and asexual, to refer to people who do not feel sexual or romantic attraction (to varying degrees) (Queer Undefined, 2022)

In the DRs K_1 a first discourse referent x is introduced: $A(x)$ is of the gender $\mathbf{Gender}(x) = : \mathbf{Gender}_{nat}(x) = f \vee \mathbf{Gender}_{nat}(x) = m$. This is because we do not know the natural gender of A but assume that they are either female or male. The expression $\neg \mathbf{bi}(x)$ informs us that the action of ‘not being bi’ is carried out by x . Now let us turn to the second clause of the sentence: *iel est aroace* (‘they are aroace’)



Here again, we can see that in K_2 a new discourse referent is introduced which carries a presupposition of gender: $\mathbf{Gender}(y) = \exists x \in X : \mathbf{Gender}_{nat}(x) = f \vee \mathbf{Gender}_{nat}(x) = m$. We then have to find the suitable antecedent that follows the given gender constraints. Here, similarly to the plural cases the feature ‘inclusive’ requires the set to have a masculine or a feminine member, the difference with the plural examples above is thus the fact that one person has one gender, therefore we are seeing here the connective ‘or’. Following the projection line up we encounter A , which respects the grammatical gender constraints for pronouns: $\mathbf{Gender}(y) = \mathbf{Gender}(x)$, as they have the same gender feature and thus allows for pronoun resolution. We can now construct the DRS, K_2' .



Again, for K_1' , we followed the projection line of *iel* up, to find the perfect match for the presuppositional content (gender), which makes $A(x)$ the antecedent and thus equate the y with x .

In this section I have extended the existing Standard pronominal French grammar with the inclusive neo-pronoun *iel(s)*. This neo-pronoun takes the same grammatical gender categories as the traditional pronouns *elle* for feminine and *il* for masculine and also infers

grammatical gender from the referents natural gender. The main difference lies in the possible referents of the neo-pronoun, while *il* and *elle* refer to a specific gender:

$$\llbracket elle \rrbracket = \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f]$$

$$\llbracket il \rrbracket = \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m],$$

iel does not but allows non commitment to one gender over the other by implying the referent to be of either gender:

$$\llbracket iel \rrbracket = \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f] \vee [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m].$$

This difference in meaning is especially visible on the plural *iels*, allowing speakers to avoid the generic masculine:

$$\llbracket iels \rrbracket = \exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f].$$

We can thus see that the feature change between Standard French and Inclusive French, for animate nouns, is rather minimal. In both varieties the feature [Human] remains, as these nouns are found denoting human referents, especially *iel(s)*, which is almost only found referring to humans. Furthermore, the gender features (f and m) remain as well, *iel(s)* only allows for a non-committal option. Finally, we again see that Inclusive French follows the same rules for plural and singular as Standard French does. These two varieties are thus not inherently different but rather Inclusive can be seen as the extension of Standard French, an extension that is further developed in Neutral French.

4.4. Neutral French

After the first changes towards an emancipation of women, western societies further broadened their discussion of the notion of gender, especially its traditional binary distinctions. With the advances of science, we also learned that biological sex, which has been considered the basis for a person's gender is not as binary as initially thought biological speaking a binary distinction between female and male based on criteria such as genitalia, hormone levels or chromosomes is rather difficult (Fuentes, 2022). People have thus moved from biological sex to social gender, which refers “to the characteristics of women, men, girls and boys that are socially constructed” such as “norms, behaviours and roles associated with being a woman, man, girl or boy, as well as relationships with each other” (Kari, 2019). This shift can also be observed in language: natural gender is now not equated with biological sex anymore but with social gender. The discussion of social gender centres the personal aspect of gender: as stated by the World health Organization: “gender identity refers to a person's deeply felt, internal and individual experience of gender” (Kari, 2019). In this conception of gender identity no one but oneself can indicate one's gender identity, neither social nor biological aspects. Furthermore, as previously mentioned in this thesis, the binary understating of genders is slowly being broken open. While the existence of humans identifying as women or men is not being questioned western societies' view on gender identity is changing to allow other identities, outside the binary to freely exist and be recognized. These identities outside the gender binary of man and woman are many, mainly due to the personal nature of gender identity but are referred in this thesis via the umbrella term ‘non-binary’.

As the process of emancipation and the fight for equality, these social changes are also reflected in the French language. After the creation of Inclusive French as a by-product of the

former two (presented in the previous section) Neutral French emerges. This variety does not seek to destroy or deconstruct the existing binary grammatical gender categories but to add a third one which is neither one nor the other. The neutral aspect of these new word forms is very well seen in the neo-pronoun *ael*, this pronoun does not carry any morphological indication of masculine or feminine but stands on its own. It thus allows the speakers to use a pronoun which reflects the personal aspect of a social gender outside of the binary of man or woman: its exact meaning is up to the referents personal understanding of their gender. Furthermore, the move from natural gender to social gender for grammatical gender assignment for animate or human nouns in Neutral French also affects the semantics of the traditional pronouns *elle* and *il*. It is now not the referent's natural gender that aligns with the lexeme's gender but its social gender (32).

(32)

$$\begin{aligned} \llbracket elle \rrbracket &= \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(x) = f] \\ \llbracket il \rrbracket &= \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(x) = m] \\ \llbracket ael \rrbracket &= \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(x) = p] \end{aligned}$$

The semantics of *ael*, illustrated in (32) indicate that the referents natural (now social not biological) gender is personal (p). It is important to underline that any attempts to create a third category for people that are neither man nor woman defeat the purpose of the identity of 'non-binary'. This identity emerges from the understanding of gender as a social construct and spectrum which depends on many aspects which are highly personal and unique to one person. While there seems to be a certain consensus on the identities of men or women, even if they are riddled with different understandings of these genders, 'non-binary' rejects these categorizations. For this reason, I defined the social gender as p standing for personal.

This other neo-pronoun is, just as its traditional and inclusive counterparts, is also found in its plural form: *aels*. From the analysis of corpus 4 in chapter 3 we can over see that the use of plural *aels* is very rare. It seems to be a pronoun that is primarily used in its singular form to refer to a person whose identity lies outside the gender binary. Nevertheless, can we define the meaning of this neo-pronoun. The corpus analysis allows me to claim that *aels* is used in the same context as *iels*, it thus allows the speaker to avoid any commitment towards the referents' genders.

(33)

Let us assume a set Y

$$\llbracket aels \rrbracket = \exists x \exists y \exists z [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ z \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ z \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(y) = f \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(z) = p]$$

The plural neo-pronoun *aels* thus informs us that the group of people is most likely to be composed of at least one man, one woman and one non-binary person. This definition is similar to that of in 4.3. ($\llbracket iels \rrbracket = \exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f]$) but a bit broader as it also (explicitly) includes non-binary people ($\text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(z) = p$) and presents the switch from natural to social gender. In practice, the same

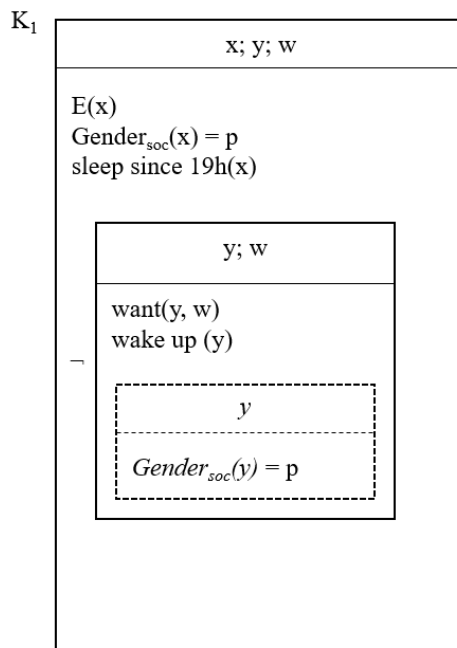
set of referents is likely to be picked out, explaining the occurrence in the same context of *iels* and *aels*.

As with *iel* and *iels*, the addition of this second neo-pronoun seems to fit easily into the workings of pronominal grammar in French. To illustrate this let us take a look at the following examples (34), taken from corpus 3 and 4 and modified for simplicity, within the light of the DRT.

(34)

- a. *E²⁴ dort depuis 19h ael ne veut pas se réveiller*
 E sleep_{SG-3P} since 19h they_{∅-SG} NEG want_{SING-3P} not themselves_{REFL} wake up_{INF}
 E has been sleeping since 19h they don't want to wake up
- b. *Mes potes sont des mamies, aels dorment.*
- c. *My friends_{PL} be_{3P-PL} the grandmas they_{∅-PL} sleep_{3P-PL}*
- d. *My friends are grandmas, they are sleeping.*

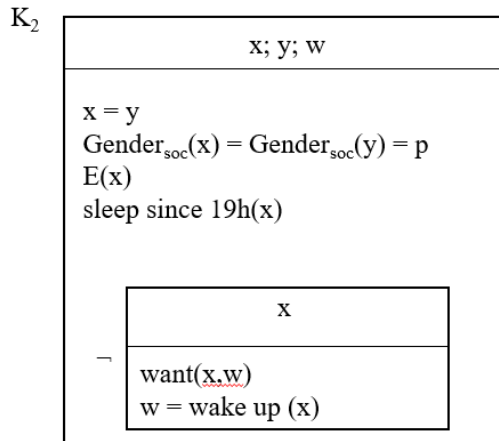
Let us start with (33a) in K_1 below.



In this first DRS K_1 we see the introduction of three discourse referents: x , y and w . $E(x)$ indicates that x stands for a non-binary person named E, the non-binary gender is indicated by $\text{Gender}(x) = \exists x : \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(x) = p$ and this discourse referents executes the action of sleeping since 19h ($\text{sleep since } 19h(x)$). The discourse referent y executes the actions of not wanting something ($\neg \text{want}(y, w)$) and waking up and ($\text{wake up}(y)$) and carries the presuppositional gender feature $\text{Gender}(x) = \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(x) = p$. We again have to choose a suitable antecedent that follows the same gender constraints. As said before feature ‘inclusive’ requires the set to

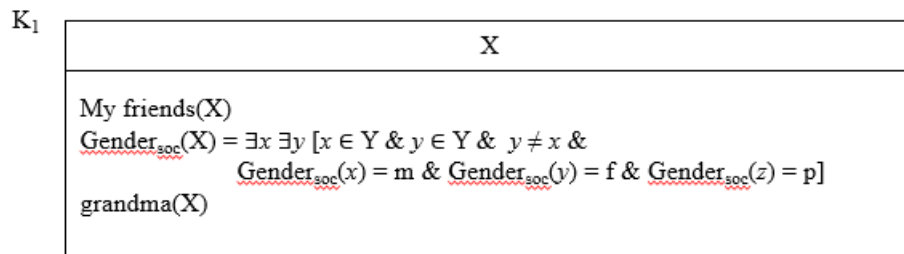
²⁴ Name redacted for privacy reasons

have a masculine and a feminine member. Following its projection line up we encounter E who we know is non-binary and thus carries the gender feature $\exists x : \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(x) = p$. Again, the grammatical gender constraints for pronouns, $\text{Gender}(y) = \text{Gender}(x)$ are respected and allow for pronoun resolution. Furthermore, we know that what E (represented by x) does not want (represented by w) is to wake up, we can indicate this by stating **w = wake up(y)**. We can now construct the DRS, K_2 .

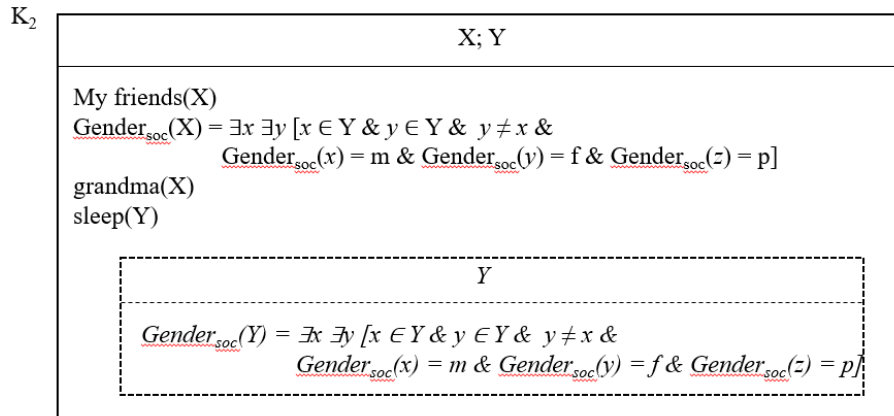


Here we see the final DRS for this sentence which informs us that the neo-pronoun stands for E.

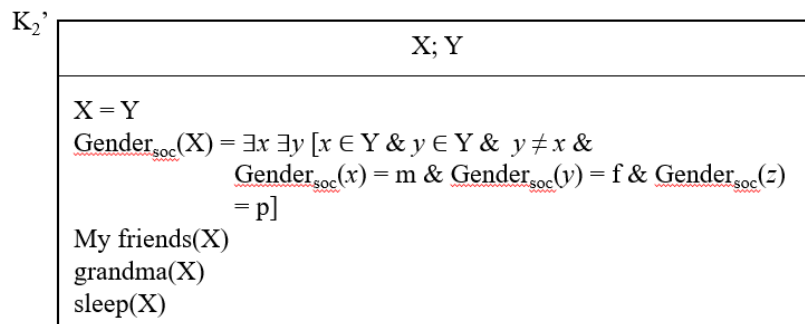
Turning to the plural counterpart in (33), we obtain the following DRSs.



In K_1 above, **My friends(X)** is the new discourse referent, **X** stands for the set consisting of the people making up the speaker's friend (the hearer has no idea about the gender of the people in the group and assumes that they can be any gender: illustrated with **Gender_{soc}(X) = Gender_{soc}(x) = m & Gender_{soc}(y) = f & Gender_{soc}(z) = p**) and **grandma(X)** asserts that the action of being a grandma is carried out by said set. Now we can turn to the second clause.



In the DRS K_2 above we see the introduction of a new discourse referent Y . This discourse referent also carries a presupposition of gender: **$\text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(Y) = \exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(y) = f \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(z) = p]$** . We again have to choose a suitable antecedent that follows the same gender constraints. As said before feature ‘inclusive’ requires the set to have a masculine and a feminine member. Following its projection line up we encounter X . Again, the grammatical gender constraints for pronouns, $\text{Gender}(y) = \text{Gender}(x)$ are respected and allow for pronoun resolution. We can now construct the DRS, K_2' , indicating that $X = Y$ (K_2' below).



Similar to the Inclusive variety, Neutral French can be seen as an extension of the two preceding grammars: it takes aspects from both Standard French and Inclusive French. The first difference with these two varieties lies in the referent’s gender responsible for grammatical gender assignment, while Inclusive and Standard French rely on the referent’s natural gender, we see the switch we see here a switch to social gender. Furthermore, dissimilarly to Inclusive French, the neutral variety does not merge the two existing gender categories but broadens the option with a third option: personal (p) allowing to represent the spectral aspect of (social) gender

$$\llbracket ael \rrbracket = \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(x) = p].$$

It remains similar to Inclusive French in the plural however, as it also allows for all options to be part of the meaning:

$$\llbracket aels \rrbracket = \exists x \exists y \exists z [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ z \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ z \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(y) = f \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(z) = p].$$

4.5. Conclusion

In this chapter, I have taken a closer look at the semantics of (neo-)pronouns in French. Based on Kamp & Reyle's theory (1993), combining it with a presuppositional account introduced by Van der Sandt (1992) I have built models for the different French grammars in focus during this thesis: Standard French, and the Neo-French varieties: Inclusive French and Neutral French. At this moment in time, these three varieties are synchronic: they coexist to various levels of frequency, with Neutral French being the most recent and community specific. In the examples given in sections 4.3. and 4.4, I analyse and model different utterances containing the (neo-)pronouns, following the previously established construction rules. The three French grammars described in this chapter and their respective construction rules are the following:

- (i) *Standard French* with its traditional binary pronouns *elle/elles* ('she_{SG-FEM}'/'they_{PL-FEM}') and *il/ils* ('he_{SG-MASC}'/'they_{PL-MASC}'), and the construction rules:
 $\llbracket elle \rrbracket = \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f] \vee [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = f]$
 Let us assume a set Y
 $\llbracket elles \rrbracket = \forall x \in Y [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f] \vee [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = f]$
 $\llbracket il \rrbracket = \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m] \vee [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = m]$
 Let us assume a set Y
 $\llbracket ils \rrbracket = \exists x \in Y [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m] \vee [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = m]$
- (ii) *Inclusive French* with the addition of the pronouns *iel/iels* ('they_{SING-INCL}'/'they_{PL-INCL}') which allow speakers to include both of the traditional pronouns in an attempt to include everyone and not favour one gender over the other. With the construction rules:
 $\llbracket iel \rrbracket = \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f] \vee [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m]$
 Let us assume a set Y
 $\llbracket iels \rrbracket = \exists x \exists y [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(y) = f]$
- (iii) *Neutral French* with the addition of the neo-pronouns *ael/aels* ('they_{SING-NEUT}'/'they_{PL-NEUT}') where the speaker creates an explicit lexical space for people who identify outside of the gender binary. Furthermore, this varieties introduces the sociolinguistic switch from natural gender to social gender for grammatical gender assignment of human noun, represented in the construction rules:
 $\llbracket elle \rrbracket = \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f] \vee [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = f]$
 Let us assume a set Y
 $\llbracket elles \rrbracket = \exists x \in Y [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = f] \vee [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = f]$
 $\llbracket il \rrbracket = [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m] \vee [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = m]$
 Let us assume a set Y
 $\llbracket ils \rrbracket = \exists x \in Y [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{nat}}(x) = m] \vee [-\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{gram}}(x) = m]$
 $\llbracket ael \rrbracket = \exists x [\text{Human}(x) \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(x) = p]$
 Let us assume a set Y

$$\llbracket aels \rrbracket = \exists x \exists y \exists z [x \in Y \ \& \ y \in Y \ \& \ z \in Y \ \& \ y \neq x \ \& \ z \neq x \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(x) = m \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(y) = f \ \& \ \text{Gender}_{\text{soc}}(z) = p]$$

The above presented construction rules focus on the interpretation of (neo-)pronouns, they are thus related to the hearer. As previously introduced, there is a relevancy to the choice of varieties, this choice is made by the speaker, they know certain things about the referent (like their gender identity) and decide to use the correct pronoun as to not misgender said referent or make an explicit effort to not misgender them when they do not know the correct pronoun used by the referent. We are thus dealing here with production. A complete model for French (neo-)pronouns within the DRT thus needs to also account for the relevance of this choice executed by the speaker in order to choose the variety of French they consider the most fitting in a certain context.

5. Extra-Linguistic Information

The first chapter of this thesis provides an overview of the two gender-fair languages strategies observed in modern French: the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*. This analysis of these two phenomena does not only show their morphological aspects but also their origins. It is the latter that demonstrates us the importance of the speaker for these varieties. The choice of one of these two varieties of Neo-French over Standard French is a conscious choice by the speaker rooted in their values (1.1. and 1.2.). The importance of extra-linguistic information has been investigated in Hunter's work (2013) on indexicals. This chapter expands on her theory by applying it to the topic of Neo-French. This will allow us to include the information contained in the speaker's choice (the production) into the modelling of neo-pronouns.

In order to link my theory presented in chapter 4 to the work of Hunter (2013) we have to first examine her theory more closely. Her work focuses on the deictic first-person pronoun *I*, a topic that connects to that of the present thesis via the aspect of production mentioned above. Hunter adds onto the existing theory of indexicals in order to allow it to account for information stemming from an extra-linguistic context relevant to the interpretation of indexical. The topic of indexicals and further Hunter's analysis of the first-person pronoun *I* (2013) allows me to address the previously raised issue of the inclusion of the speaker's choice of the variety of French they use.

Hunter (2013) also assumes a presuppositional account of indexicals: she argues that each indexical has a context-invariant meaning that never makes any novel contribution to the truth-conditional content. They simply allow referents to be picked out from contextually given individuals. If the context does not provide a referent the utterance does not provide a complete semantic content and the question of the truth of the statement does not arise. Her theory on presuppositional indexical holds for the following features:

- (a) each indexical has a constant lexical meaning that determines its semantic value in a context,
- (b) this lexical meaning does not make a novel contribution to truth-conditional content,
- (c) the lexical meaning can sometimes interact with content in the surrounding discourse context in the sense that it can be bound to antecedents introduced in discourse, though such interaction is more restricted for indexicals than for many other kinds of expressions,
- (d) indexicals can have rigid interpretations (Hunter, 2013, pp. 402-403)

Hunter's theory introduces a new level into the standard DRSs in which extra-linguistic information is anchored. She calls this, the most global level of a DRS K , K_0 . In opposition to other theories (such as Maier, 2006, 2009) K_0 is not a different layer of a DRS: it differs from its sub-DRSs K_1 - K_n in the same way they differ between each other. This allows for the integration of extra-linguistic information into the DRS, for which she proposes the following procedure:

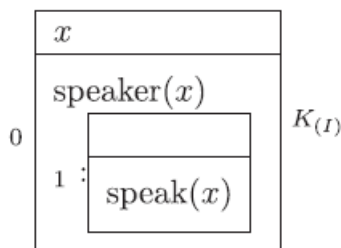
Let us assume a model of the form $\langle D, I, W, a \rangle$ where D is a domain of individuals, I is an interpretation function, W is a set of worlds and $a \in W$ is a world that serves as the actual world. An utterance introduces a discourse referent $r\pi$ into K_0 that represents an individual as well as a corresponding condition $U(r\pi)$ where U is a condition that gives the gender of the

referent represented by $\tau\pi$. Following a dynamic semantic evaluation procedure, the evaluation of DRS K takes place relative to an incoming information state, a set of pairs constituted of a world and an assignment function. This information state updates with the content of K , depending on both the nature of the incoming information state and the semantics of the conditions contained in K . The evaluation of a DRS K starts at its most global level: K_0 , which is relative to an information state of a single world-assignment pair. The evaluation for K_0 itself does not require any special evaluation procedure.

Let us assume the pair $\langle a, g\emptyset \rangle$, where a is a privileged world, taken as the actual world, in a pointed model M . The assignment function $g\emptyset$ is the empty assignment function. A successful update of this information state $\{ \langle a, g\emptyset \rangle \}$ with K_0 , results in the state $\{ \langle a, g_a \rangle \}$, where g_a is the anchor function for K_0 . In other words: the unique assignment function satisfying the conditions in K_0 given a . This process determines the anchor, the following sub-DRSs are evaluated in order starting with K_1 , in such a way that the assignments to the discourse referents in K_0 are maintained all the way through the evaluation process. All admissible assignment functions are thus extensions of the anchor function g_a (Hunter, 2013).

To provide a clearer picture of this theory I am illustrating the above with the simplified DRSs for the first-person pronoun (*I*), Hunter presents in her paper (2013).

(XQ) I am speaking.



(Hunter, 2013, p. 404)

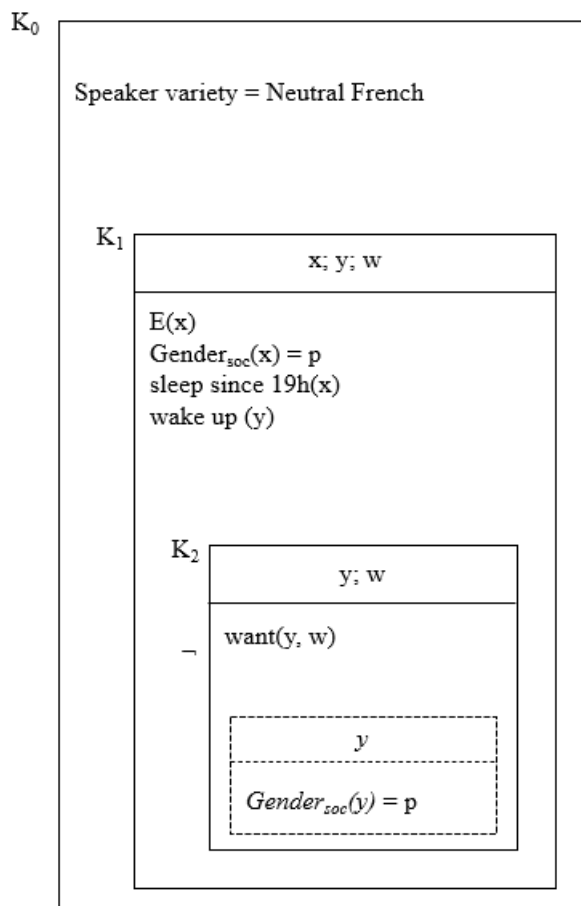
The outermost layer, indexed by a 0 is K_0 . The DRS proposed by Hunter omits the religioning of the pronoun *I* to the discourse referent x which is the speaker of the actual world. It shows us however the final DRS in which the hearer has linked the person speaking in the utterance (XQ) (*I*) to the agent in the actual world (the speaker). The content of K_0 is thus anchored in the real world.

As Hunter (2013) argues herself, the layer K_0 is not only relevant for the presuppositions of indexicals or names but can also be used to track other extra-linguistic information. This expansion on DRSs therefore allows us to include the speaker's choice of a certain variety of French. The speaker's choice is an extra-linguistic information in the most global level of the DRS: in the actual world. This aspect is a relevant part of the context in which an indexical's semantic contribution is determined (a above). The anchor function allows us to satisfy the gender conditions of K_0 , as it anchors them in the chosen variety. Each of the three varieties contain a number of (grammatical) genders which can be matched onto the referent's natural

or social gender. In Standard French these genders are feminine (f) or masculine (m). These are also the genders found in Inclusive French, whereas Neutral French has the additional personal (p) gender category. For this variety the referent's gender are thus either feminine (f), masculine (m) or something else, personal (p). The extra-linguistic information conveyed by the choice of a variety is the gender categories that possible to be made explicit. To illustrate this, I am modelling again example (34), reintroduced as (35) from chapter 4.

- (35)
- E*²⁵ *dort* *depuis 19h ael* *ne* *veut* *pas se* *réveiller*
- E sleep_{SING-3P} since 19h they_{Ø-SG} NEG want_{SING-3P} not themselves_{REFL} wake up_{INF}
- E has been sleeping since 19h they don't want to wake up

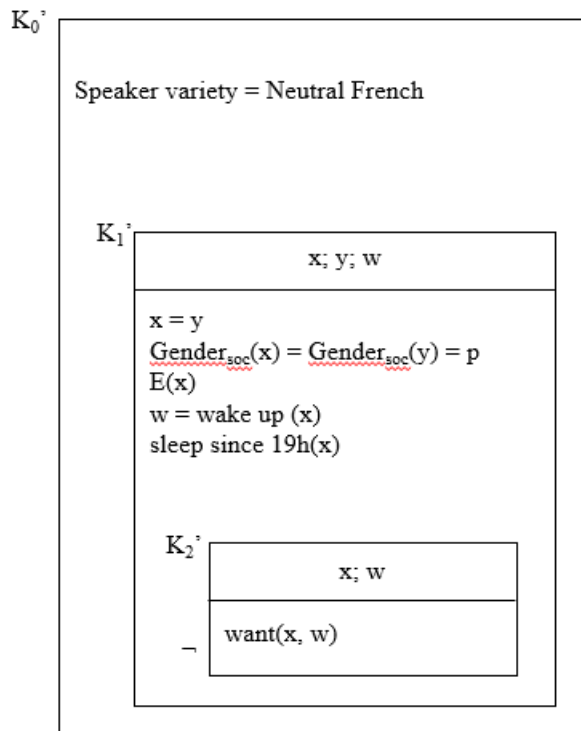
In this updated understanding of DRT, we start by adding an additional first layer, K₀, which contains the extra linguistic information relevant here.



As illustrated above that this information is the chosen variety (**Speaker variety = Neutral French**). This extra-linguistic information allows the hearer to have specific gender categories for the referent: feminine, masculine or personal. We can then proceed as before to find the correct antecedent for **y**, just as before. The additional information of the variety used by the speaker allows us then to match **y** with the non-binary discourse referent **x**, following the

²⁵ Name redacted for privacy reasons

former's projection line up. We have then the same pronoun resolution as before in section 4 of the preceding chapter.



This chapter introduced the relevant extra-linguistic information conveyed by the choice of a variety such as Inclusive or Neutral French. As mentioned in chapter 2, such a choice is conscious and motivated, it seems thus important to reflect this in their interpretation. There is a certain message that the speakers aim to convey besides what is conveyed by their word choices. The update of Hunter (2013) allows me then to include this aspect in the modelling of these neo-pronouns and with it another range of extra-linguistic meaning.

This final chapter of this thesis linked different works relevant for the analysis of the evolution of pronominal grammar in French. As introduced in chapter 1 an important part for the interpretation of neo-pronouns is the intention behind the production. At this point in time three varieties of French coexist and in order to correctly interpret the information conveyed by the speaker the hearer has to be aware of the variety chosen by the former. This is relevant because the knowledge of the semantics of the pronouns in focus (presented in chapter 4) the hearer must know, to some extent, the variety chosen. For a complete model of pronoun resolution in Modern French this extralinguistic information has to be included.

Conclusion

Summary

The present thesis focused on the question of how gender-fair language strategies affect the French Language. Dividing this topic into four research questions I was able to investigate these linguistic strategies in different lights. This final chapter constitutes the conclusion of this thesis. I will be summarising the key findings from the corpus study and briefly present the key features of my model on pronominal grammars in French by answering each of the research questions. Finally, I will be discussing the limitations of this research as well as future prospects for this field.

The first research question addressed was: What are the differences (and similarities) between the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre*? Answering this question laid the groundwork for this research. The modern French language is currently undergoing a number of societally motivated changes in relation to gender inclusivity. These changes can be identified as either the *Écriture Inclusive* or the *Écriture Neutre*, they are linguistic strategies that aim at changes the French language in an attempt to provide linguistic visibility to more than one gender. Their goals are very similar, but execution of their respective goals is rather different. The *Écriture Inclusive*, predating the other, is an extension of the Feminisation movement. It assembles a number of different morpho-syntactic strategies that share the same core: all represent both, feminine and masculine, grammatical gender markers on the same lexeme. This allows speakers to avoid the generic masculine and the commitment to one specific gender in a context where this would be unnecessary or even incorrect. The *Écriture Neutre* on the other hand, breaks with the traditional grammatical gender markers and pursues the goal of neutrality. This is achieved by the creation of new word forms and suffixes that are not recognizable as traditionally feminine or masculine.

After a detailed presentation of these linguistic phenomena, I turned to the second research question (chapter 2): How do the *Écriture Inclusive* and the *Écriture Neutre* affect pronominal French grammar? One of the most famous creations of these varieties are their neo-pronouns. Due to the large number of neo-pronouns found in French I have decided to focus on two of the most frequent ones: *iel(s)*, which has been included in the dictionary (Le Robert, 2021) and *ael(s)*. The former stems from the *Écriture Inclusive* while the latter results from the *Écriture Neutre*. The inclusion of such neo-pronouns creates issues for traditional pronominal French grammar and the grammatical gender system in general. They carry gender features that are not part of the traditional binary gender system of French. In this chapter I introduced Stand French and presented a number of hypotheses about the use of neo-pronouns in French. These hypotheses have been tested by the means of a corpus study in the following chapter.

The third chapter of this thesis is dedicated to the analysis of speaker behaviour in relation to the neo-pronouns in focus (*iel(s)* and *ael(s)*), focusing on the question What can be observed about the usage of neo-pronouns and their referents? This study aimed to investigate the following hypotheses previously formulated:

- v. The frequency of *iel* as well as its plural counterpart *iels* is expected to be higher than the that of the neutral neo-pronouns *ael* and *aels*.
- vi. *Aels*, the plural form of the neutral neo-pronoun *ael* is expected to be rather uncommon in use.
- vii. The number feature is expected to remain unaffected: *iel* and *ael* refer is used in a singular or quantificational context whereas *iels* and *aels* is used to refer to a group of people
- viii. The meaning and thus referent of the inclusive neo-pronouns *iel* and *iels* are expected to be different from the neutral neo-pronoun *ael* and *aels*. The former are more likely to be used in general situations, as opposed to the latter who I anticipate being more restricted to non-binary gender identities.

From the collected data I have indeed been able to confirm the differences in frequency between the inclusive and neutral pronouns, with *aels* being very rare. Further was I able to record a difference in meaning between *iel* and *ael* by classifying the pronouns based on their referent type. The former is more often used to refer to a person in a generic or quantificational context, *ael* on the other hand is mainly found to be referring to a non-binary person. This study further confirmed that the core structure of pronominal grammar in French remains unchanged. Comparing the use of neo-pronoun in singular and plural context it becomes clear that the number feature of neo-pronouns is not affected by the changes. What is being changed is the reflection of genders in the language, moving away from the binary distinction.

The final research question (How can we model the pronominal grammars of Inclusive and Neutral French?) has been addressed in two chapters: chapter 4 and chapter 5. After collecting the data presented in the preceding chapters, I turned to the modelling of these different grammars. During this research it became clear that French is currently exhibiting three pronominal grammars: Standard, Inclusive and Neutral. The DRT model created combines a presuppositional approach (Van der Sandt, 1992) with Hunter's (2013) work highlighting and including extra-linguistic information in pronoun resolution. This thesis underlines an important aspect of the changes in the French language stemming from the *Écriture Inclusive* and *Neutre*: while it is often argued that they destroy the French language (Académie Française, 2017) they much rather seem to enrich it. The changes in the pronominal gender do not point towards an eradication of the traditional masculine and feminine pronouns but rather towards the addition of other 'inclusive' and 'neutral' pronouns. The maintaining of the singular-plural distinction as such, where the plural counterpart of a pronoun refers to a referent that is >1 indicates that the changes are not directed at a grammatically motivated restructuring of the language. Instead, we see a socially motivated restructuring as speakers try to adapt their language to a new social reality. It is gender which is in focus not the entire structure of the language.

Limitations and Further Research

The theory presented in this thesis is the first of its kind. Previous research on this topic has been focusing on morphosyntactic or sociolinguistic aspects of the *Écriture Inclusive* and

the *Écriture Neutre* (e.g., Alpheratz, 2017, 2018, 2019, Ashley, 2019, Elmiger, 2015, Greco, 2019). The topic at hand is a very recent and still ongoing linguistic issue that is far from being fully established. The vastness and novelty of this subject, both in linguistic research as well as societal knowledge creates some difficulty for a researcher. The investigated phenomena are direct representations of changes happening in society which are rooted in a socio-political sphere. The use of neo-pronouns creates heated debates and surely affects their diffusion.

Furthermore, this thesis has been mainly focusing on western societies and European francophone countries (with France at its core), but there are many more french-speaking societies that have not been included in the understanding and modelling of meaning of these neopronouns. The direct ties with the societies in which these language strategies emerged, also affect their development and meanings.

Finally, the creation of a semantic model only marks a first step in understanding the semantics of neo-pronouns, future research will be able to test these theory and provide more insight, especially from sources that are not as controversial as Twitter. Research on the interpretation (as well as production) of neo-pronouns in French has only just started and further research will be able to include these relevant aspects.

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Appendix 1 – Google Scraper Code

```

import scrapy
from urllib.parse import urlencode
from urllib.parse import urlparse
import json
from datetime import datetime
API_KEY =
def get_url(url):
    payload = {'api_key': API_KEY, 'url': url, 'autoparse': 'true', 'country_code': 'fr'}
    proxy_url = 'http://api.scraperaapi.com/?' + urlencode(payload)
    return proxy_url
def create_google_url(query, site=""):
    google_dict = {'q': query, 'num': 100, }
    if site:
        web = urlparse(site).netloc
        google_dict['as_sitesearch'] = web
    return 'http://www.google.com/search?' + urlencode(google_dict)
    return 'http://www.google.com/search?' + urlencode(google_dict)
class GoogleSpider(scrapy.Spider):
    name = 'google'
    allowed_domains = ['api.scraperaapi.com']
    custom_settings = {'ROBOTSTXT_OBEY': False, 'LOG_LEVEL': 'INFO',
                       'CONCURRENT_REQUESTS_PER_DOMAIN': 10,
                       'RETRY_TIMES': 5}
    def start_requests(self):
        #queries = ['iel', 'ael']
        queries = ['iel', 'iels', 'al', 'als', 'ael', 'aels', 'ul', 'uls', 'ol', 'ols']
        for query in queries:
            url = create_google_url(query)
            yield scrapy.Request(get_url(url), callback=self.parse, meta={'pos': 0})
    def parse(self, response):
        di = json.loads(response.text)
        pos = response.meta['pos']
        dt = datetime.now().strftime('%Y-%m-%d %H:%M:%S')
        for result in di['organic_results']:
            title = result['title']
            snippet = result['snippet']
            link = result['link']
            item = {'title': title, 'snippet': snippet, 'link': link, 'position': pos, 'date': dt}
            pos += 1
            yield item
        next_page = di['pagination']['nextPageUrl']
        if next_page:
            yield scrapy.Request(get_url(next_page), callback=self.parse, meta={'pos': pos})

```

Appendix 2 – Twitter Scraper: Codes For Each Neo-Pronoun

Corpus 1: *iel*

```
import snsrape.modules.twitter as sntwitter
import pandas
tweets_list4 = []
for i,tweet in enumerate(sntwitter.TwitterSearchScraper("iel until:2022-04-30
lang:fr").get_items()):
    if i>500:
        break
    tweets_list4.append([tweet.date, tweet.id, tweet.content, tweet.user.username])
df = pd.DataFrame(tweets_list4, columns=["Datetime", "Tweet Id", "Text", "Username"])
df.to_csv('out_iel.csv')
```

Corpus 2: *iels*

```
import snsrape.modules.twitter as sntwitter
import pandas
tweets_list4 = []
for i,tweet in enumerate(sntwitter.TwitterSearchScraper("iels until:2022-04-30
lang:fr").get_items()):
    if i>500:
        break
    tweets_list4.append([tweet.date, tweet.id, tweet.content, tweet.user.username])
df = pd.DataFrame(tweets_list4, columns=["Datetime", "Tweet Id", "Text", "Username"])
df.to_csv('out_iels.csv')
```

Corpus 3: *ael*

```
import snsrape.modules.twitter as sntwitter
import pandas
tweets_list4 = []
for i,tweet in enumerate(sntwitter.TwitterSearchScraper("ael until:2022-04-30
lang:fr").get_items()):
    if i>1000:
        break
    tweets_list4.append([tweet.date, tweet.id, tweet.content, tweet.user.username])
df = pd.DataFrame(tweets_list4, columns=["Datetime", "Tweet Id", "Text", "Username"])
df.to_csv('out_ael.csv')
```

Corpus 4: *aels*

```
import snsrape.modules.twitter as sntwitter
import pandas
tweets_list4 = []
for i,tweet in enumerate(sntwitter.TwitterSearchScraper("aels until:2022-04-30
lang:fr").get_items()):
```

```
if i>500:  
    break  
    tweets_list4.append([tweet.date, tweet.id, tweet.content, tweet.user.username])  
df = pd.DataFrame(tweets_list4, columns=["Datetime", "Tweet Id", "Text", "Username"])  
df.to_csv('out_aels.csv')
```