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France's culture wars are going into the next round

A French dictionary starts listing the gender-neutral pronoun 'iel' online — sparking a wave of politicised outrage over supposed 'wokeism'

France is in deep, deep trouble. Hit hard by the Covid-19 pandemic and just a few months before the presidential election, the country – or rather, the French language – is under threat. Who's the culprit? The terror of political correctness imported from across the Atlantic, also known as 'wokeism'. We know too well that America exports its culture to the whole world: movies, music, Anglicisms – and now its obsession with gender-neutral language too.

There seems to be no other explanation why the esteemed French-language dictionary *Le Petit Robert* has included the gender-neutral pronoun *iel* (pronounced 'yell') in its online edition. This combination of the male pronoun *il* and the female pronoun *elle* can be used for people who don't identify as male or female, or whose gender is unknown. These three small letters have been causing a ruckus in France for weeks now.

While transgender organisations have welcomed the decision, there was little enthusiasm to be found elsewhere. First Lady Brigitte Macron explained that there are 'two pronouns: *il* and *elle*' and on Twitter François Jolivet, a member of France's governing party *La République en Marche* (LREM), in his outrage, denied *Le Petit Robert* its status as a 'reference'.

In a letter to the *Académie Française*, supreme guardian of French linguistic integrity, Jolivet called on the body to prevent the imminent destruction of the French language by 'woke ideology'. He was applauded for this by his colleague, Education Minister Jean-Michel Blanquer, who declared that 'inclusive spelling is not the future of the French language'.

The battle over the French language

Oh well, there's hardly any better place on Earth to argue about language and its future than France! The venerable *Académie Française* keeps a close watch on compliance with grammar rules to in the country, contesting anything that appears to be too English or modern. Conversely, the literary group *Oulipo* is trying to modernise French through playful writing exercises, for example by writing an entire book without the letter *e*. A variety of the language spoken by young people known as *verlan* joyously swaps the syllables of a word to create something new. And there has been a debate going on for years about whether the French language is sexist or too 'male', and if so, to what extent.

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This criticism is not unfounded. There is a rule in French that the male form takes precedence over the female. It was invented in 1676 by Jesuit priest Dominique Bouhour, who proclaimed: 'When the two sexes meet, the more noble must prevail.' And the more noble is, of course, the male. There can be 99 women and one man in a group and, grammatically speaking, this group would be classed as male, taking the male plural form *ils.* Because the male takes precedence over the female.

At the moment, though, American-style political correctness seems be taking precedence, brazen enough to not even stop at the French language and all of its beautiful centuries-old rules. This isn't the first time 'wokeism' has rubbed conservatives up the wrong way, though. For them, 'woke' represents a left-wing ideology, identity politics, and a victim mentality. It means pandering to the interests of individual groups, which they claim is unwarranted and incompatible with the French principle of universalism that states that all people are equal, have the same rights, and should therefore be treated exactly the same. Positive discrimination, quotas, inclusive language... France says *non, merci*.

Who decides on the 'right' language?

The dispute about *iel* is causing such a stir because this goes beyond language alone. The French language is seen as an expression of French values too, an expression of what constitutes the *République*. As early as 2017, Blanquer said, 'there is only one French language, one grammar, one Republic'. Incidentally, the word *République* is female in French. So too is Marianne, its personification, seen on the French government's

official logo, French euro coins and on French postage stamps. And apparently that's good enough for Blanquer to demonstrate the inherent feminism of the French state and its language. Poor Marianne must get used to being portrayed as a feminist symbol for absolutely everything.

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But yes, it's about more than language – it's about the future of the country! And who can save the country? Only the *Académie Française* of course, whose verdict on the *iel* dispute is eagerly awaited. It's long been clear where the *Académie* stands on trying to make the French language more inclusive and more gender-neutral: in May 2020, it published a statement declaring that inclusive spelling is 'harmful' to the usage and comprehensibility of the French language.

The *Académie* is not entirely wrong: inclusive spelling makes a Romance language with two genders like French more difficult to write, speak, and understand. Gender-neutral language may have its place in social circles where it's not only what is said that's important, but also *how* it is said. But everywhere else, no. Well, not yet... because language is alive, it is constantly changing. And also, language is a matter of habit. The more often you say something, the easier it rolls off your tongue. Feminist organisation *Nous Toutes* commented that 'it is not for ministers or dictionary authors to decide the future of a language. Those who can change the language are those who speak it: you, us, everyone.'

Keep calm and carry on

Perhaps those politicians who are so easily triggered by three little letters should take a leaf out of Charles Bimbenet's book, the director-general of publishing house *Le Robert*. He remained astoundingly calm in the face of the perhaps manufactured outrage that he and his team had instigated.

In a statement, he wrote that although usage of the term *iel* is still rather rare, it has been sharply increasing for several months, as the in-house documentalists have noted. So, they deemed it useful to clarify the meaning of this term for people to understand and decide whether to use it or not. Bimbenet welcomed the controversy surrounding the French language, 'its development and its use', as it at least shows how 'alive' French is.

Let's hope so. Perhaps those three small letters don't mean the end of the Republic, and the situation in France isn't as bad as it seems – well,

linguistically at least.



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