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Assignée garçon
or
Grappling with the trans question in the French language

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With her 1986 novel *Sphinx*, Anne Garréta achieved a virtuosic literary feat by keeping the gender identity of her protagonists forever undefined. The rules for agreement in French for possessive adjectives—with objects possessed rather than the subject possessor, as is the case in English—evidently made the author’s task slightly less daunting. Yet, Garréta’s work is clearly prescient in calling attention to our habitually bi-gendered view of the world, which cis-normative dominance has encouraged and instilled. When Vassar students approached me in 2015 to request the possibility of using gender-neutral pronouns in the French classroom, my first response was to draw their attention to Garréta’s novel, and to point out the enormous challenges that a translator would have to overcome in order to render the author’s work into English. As [Gaëlle Cogan](#), reviewing Emma Ramadan’s 2015 translation of the work, succinctly explains:

[t]he difficulty lies primarily in possessive adjectives, which in English agree with the subject (“his/her face” immediately reveals gender), whereas in French they agree with the object (in “*son visage*,” “*son*” is masculine because “*visage*” is a masculine noun, and the gender of the face being described is not revealed) (2016).

My intent in citing Garréta’s successful experiment to my students was to bring to the fore the different limitations of each language, and consider with them the surprising flexibility available to the author, despite the fact that any substantive in French is always-already gendered masculine or feminine. Yet, that first conversation set in motion a series of further discussions and research with students and colleagues alike, and eventually led to deeper inquiry and reflection on what was being potentially masked—or as some might say, thwarted—by the specific limitations imposed by the French language’s bi-gendered structure.

I would like to examine some of the apparently impossible conundrums revealed by the subsequent explorations initiated by that first encounter with my students in order to consider some recent attempts to expand the linguistic space available to French speakers. When I began studying this issue in 2015, almost no scholarship existed on the effects of the linguistic limitations of the French language on the politics of queer discourse.¹ I suspected that, unlike the

¹ Luca Greco’s 2018 study of Belgian drag king culture, *Dans les coulisses du genre*, makes a significant contribution to breaking new ground in this nascent field. The journal [Langage et société](#) (of which Greco is Editor in chief) has also published special issues dedicated to gender issues.

Anglophone American experience, the lack of similarly widespread trans activism to adopt new pronouns in France was not only due to the bi-gendered nature of the language, but also could perhaps be traced in part to the paramount role language plays in French Republican identity formation. For instance, despite the surprise expressed by some of my students, neither [OUTrans](#) nor [Inter-LGBT](#), two leading Paris-based organizations in support of Trans and gender nonconforming (T/GNC) individuals, explicitly mention pronoun usage in their official mission statements on their websites.² Whereas, in the US, most T/GNC support organizations,³ such as the National Center for Transgender Equality (NCTE), explicitly advocate for pronoun choice: “If you’re not sure what pronouns someone uses, ask,” states the “respect and dignity” section of the NCTE [Website](#). But, this does not necessarily mean that the gender nonconforming French speakers are less likely to be interested in breaking out of the strict limitations imposed by the bi-gendering as a result of the French language. In light of these initial reflections, this essay will explore the extent to which the hegemonic French linguistic preference for the masculine gender has both rendered difficult any identification with the feminine and at the same time had the effect of invisibilizing GNC subjects. Furthermore, it raises the broader question of the extent to which new linguistic tools might be fundamental to legitimizing a political space for GNC members of French-speaking societies.

Before I proceed, I would like to make it clear that as a relative novice in matters trans, and as a cis-gendered, if queer identifying, person, I recognize that some of my remarks might seem self-evident or even superfluous to my trans friends and readers. My interest in raising them, however, stems from being caught in the tension between the exigencies of my immediate micro-context and those of a broader scholarly discourse. On the one hand, I strive to be inclusive on a daily basis as an instructor in the language classroom and also to respect my non-binary friends’ desires and request for visible (or audible) identification. On the other hand, as a scholar, I must consider questions of feasibility, institutional power, and the reach of authority in the broader cultural and political field. As we know, in the French context, legislation is a major path to formalizing linguistic legitimacy,⁴ a point to which I will return briefly further in my

² Inter-LGBT has a broad [statement on language of respect and dignity](#) as one of its mission planks: “Encourager les médias à utiliser un langage respectueux de l’identité et de la dignité des personnes trans.” When I contacted members of OUTrans in October 2018 to ask for their thoughts about the use of new pronouns in France, one activist responded with genuine regret for feeling unable to help as they were not linguists (personal e-mail communication, October 2018). Several conversations I had in France during the same period (October 2018) took a similar turn. I cautiously read this as a possible indication that, for some, even within the trans community, addressing the limitations of the French language within the Republican context is so daunting that, failing institutionally initiated changes, they might need the weight of “professional” authority (linguists) to help them take on such a monumental task.

³ Gender nonconforming (GNC) individuals, can include intersex persons, those who identify as gender-fluid or non-binary, genderqueer, pangender, among other terms used to express nonconformity with the gendered norms of masculine and feminine. Many of these individuals identify as transgender as well.

⁴ The long and hard fought [legislation](#) passed in 2000 that (at least theoretically) ensures *Parité*, or equal representation of women and men in all elected offices, is a case in point. However, the

discussion; yet there are other possible strategies that have begun to be adopted that warrant our attention. With these caveats in mind, in what follows, I would like to present four interlinked avenues for exploration that might facilitate opening discussion of some of the questions underlying the request made by my students.

I. Queering Gender in French

At the outset, we need to recognize that proffering new pronouns and other grammatical changes implicitly demands a radical change in the way we view the world—after all language is the very basis of communication, and constitution of the conscious subject. For, as frivolous or superfluous as these linguistic changes might be deemed by some, they are in fact rooted in two related underlying impelling forces. First, a linguistically queer heterodoxy is implicitly predicated on a fundamental epistemological claim about the possibility of the constitution of the subject prior to language (and evidently, on fairly strong grounds, otherwise, one would not find evidence of gender nonconforming individuals in cultures such as France, where bi-gendered language is predominant). Second, such a possibility explicitly challenges the hegemony of cis-society. In other words, the trans/queer subject is not only cognizant of their gender-nonconformity or -fluidity but the moment of recognition occurs outside the realm of the available language (and/or can only be expressed in limited ways such as “je me sens/je suis ni masculin ni féminin”). Thereby, French, because it is bi-gendered, is experienced to be restricting, and thus insufficient for a “true” gender expression that is desirable for the full constitution of the gender nonconforming subject. In a sense, an argument could be made that trans subjects claiming this new linguistic space have turned on its head the logic of understanding Judith Butler’s notion of gender performativity (1991), which so rocked, if not re-defined, our understanding of feminist and queer identification in the 1990s.⁵ Yet, on further reflection, it becomes evident that even if gender is performatively constructed, for Francophone non-binary subjects, the limitation imposed by the language precludes, within that framework, access to even conceptualizing gender-neutral or -fluid possibilities.

For the purposes of this discussion, I would like to bracket any questions pertaining to the validity of pre-linguistic or performative constructs of gender expression—after all, they have

analogy has its limits, given that unlike with *parité*—in which the “protected” class of citizens (women) are already recognized as an integral part of polity—gender nonconforming individuals have that additional challenge to be legitimized in the eyes of the state.

⁵ In *Whipping Girl* (2007), Julia Serrano makes an argument against a sole reliance on the theory of gender performativity, and in favor of also paying attention to biology, a position that has been read (wrongly in Serrano’s view) as a wholesale critique of Butler’s theory. In 2015, Serrano published a [blog post in response](#) to critiques of her position as anti Butler, explaining that she was more critical of *misreadings* of Butler’s concept of performativity, in particular the memes “All gender is drag” and “all gender is performance” (which Butler herself has argued against). Yet, Serrano also clarifies that Butler’s approach is still limited in her view, given its reliance on a “social-only approach” and reiterates that “ignoring or denying any possible biological influence on gender is shortsighted and potentially detrimental” ([Julia Serano on Judith Butler](#)).

very real and sedimented manifestation, much like national communities even if they are always-already “imagined” (Anderson 1983)—to focus more on the linguistic, political and cultural consequences of such constraints encountered by non-binary Francophone individuals. And this constraint, as I hope to elucidate, is imbricated within the French State’s response to claims of even bi-gendered linguistic egalitarianism (*l’écriture inclusive*, or inclusive writing, to which I will return further in my discussion), that bête noire of French traditionalist members of the *Académie française* as well as others in the field such as Alain Rey, the linguist and lexicographer most well-known as editor-in-chief of the *Dictionnaires Robert* and their companion volumes on the French language. Rather than oppose *l’écriture inclusive* and attempts to create space for non-binary subjectivities within the French language, I see both endeavors as symptoms of resistance to a cis-patriarchy. In other words, rather than saying *l’écriture inclusive* doesn’t address non-binary issues because it remains rooted in the gender binary (thereby flattening the distinction between masculine and feminine into “binary”), I would like to focus on how the French language invisibilizes both the feminine and the non-binary.

In a lucid 2016 article in the *Transgender Studies Quarterly*, Alexandre Baril takes French feminists to task for inadvertently, if not willfully, resisting the inclusion of trans subjectivities in their discourse (Baril 2016). His conclusion is worth citing at length, for:

as surprising as [it] may be to many [A]nglophones, the latest “developments” in trans/feminisms in Francophone feminist communities consist of simply affirming the existence of trans/feminist perspectives, [... and to] simply including them within the realm of possibility. *Within these [Francophone] linguistic, cultural, and national contexts, moving beyond the dichotomy between inclusive and exclusionary/transphobic feminism is a largely unintelligible undertaking, difficult to conceive on epistemological and conceptual levels. Theorizing the absence of these discussions and this dichotomy is actually the next step necessary for the emergence of francophone trans/feminist voices capable of breaking through the silence* (Baril 2016, 45. My emphasis).

I would like to suggest that in order to undertake the theorizing that Baril deems necessary, the first step is to note the linguistic hurdles with which any theorizing in the French language has to contend. To that end, it behooves us to consider some of the historical gender-related challenges faced by those who wish to create neutral or inclusive spaces within the French language.⁶

II. Feminists and *l’écriture inclusive*

Many contemporary French feminists have long argued that France ought to recognize if not remedy the explicitly pro-masculine (at best), or misogynistic (at worst) rules of French grammar. For example, to refer to thirty women and one man—a mixed plural subject containing just one singular masculine element— French mandates the masculine plural pronoun “ils.” Moreover, the agreement in gender and number of all related adjectives is dictated by the rule of the primacy of the masculine gender (“le masculin l’emporte sur le féminin”). Thus, the rule compels us to say “cet homme et les trente femmes sont *intelligents*”, rather than “*intelligentes*”.

⁶ For an in-depth discussion and fuller socio-political analysis of the very public debate around gender and sexuality in France, see Bruno Perreau (2018).

Since 2017, a fierce debate on the legitimacy of “[l’écriture inclusive](#)” has raged between feminists, various public intellectuals of different political persuasions and the French government, not to mention vociferous and rather dramatic [opposition from the Académie française](#) which went so far as to claim that in the face of this “aberration,” French was in a “péril mortel.” On 7 November 2017, 314 educators in France published a [manifesto](#) on slate.fr to cease teaching such sexist rules and instead adopt guidelines and best practices on inclusive writing.⁷ In a [circular dated 21 November 2017](#), the Edouard Philippe government promptly issued a directive not to adopt in particular the practice of using repurposed typographical innovations such as the *point médian* (also called the interpunct in English, and not explicitly singled out in the Prime Minister’s communiqué) to indicate a shortcut for the recommended practice of [double flexion](#).⁸

As the feminist historian Eliane Viennot (2014) contends, rules such as “le masculin l’emporte sur le féminin” stem from a long history of patriarchal—even misogynistic—traditions, and were based on claims of a natural supremacy of male power, which is reflected in the grammatical masculine default. For Viennot, rather than being a linguistic fault, modern French’s bias against the feminine is rooted in masculinist supremacy promoted by intellectuals and institutions of the day, and proof of the fallacy of that imposed bias lies within language itself:

les problèmes que nous rencontrons avec le « sexisme de la langue française » ne relèvent pas de la langue elle-même, mais des interventions effectuées sur elle depuis le XVII^e siècle par des intellectuels et des institutions qui s’opposaient à l’égalité des sexes; et que, pour l’essentiel aussi, les solutions que nous cherchons à ces problèmes existent déjà. Les solutions linguistiques, s’entend [sic] (Viennot 2014, 9-10).

Prior to the seventeenth century, for example, different agreement rules were prevalent in which the proximity of the substantive to the adjective was privileged in attributing its gender. Thus, both “le garçon et les filles étaient heureuses”—the boy and the girls were happy, adjective in the feminine plural, given the proximity of “filles” to the adjective “heureuse” and “les filles et le garçon étaient heureux”—adjective in the masculine plural—were acceptable.⁹ Although Viennot proffers a strong argument to de-masculinize French using its own linguistic history, both the proposed solutions and indeed the very framework within which she operates remains bi-gendered. Viennot concludes that the resolution of gender inequity would nullify the unfair

⁷ See also various articles on this subject matter in *Le Monde*: 11/8-23 November 2017; *Libération*: 1-13 November 2017; *Le Figaro*: 10-11 November 2017.

⁸ Thus, in the written medium, “les étudiants et étudiantes” would be replaced by “les étudiant·e·s” in written form, to be read orally as in the original. See also Mathilde Damgé’s critique of the circular’s contradictions in [Le Monde of 22 November 2017](#).

⁹ Quoting Ronsard’s writing “Mais l’Évangile saint du Sauveur Jésus Christ [/] M’a fermement gravée une foi dans l’esprit,” Viennot notes the agreement between adjective “gravée” and the feminine substantive “foi,” due to their proximity rather than follow modern agreement rules which would render the adjective masculine—“gravé”—to agree with the masculine third person subject—“L’Évangile” (18).

dominance of either gender allowing the French language to become indifferent to the gender's political and cultural valences, thus effectively providing a neutral space such as the one to which non-binary and gender fluid subjects have recently laid claim (111).¹⁰

But, as even Viennot has noted, no serious institutional effort has yet been devoted to mobilizing for a gender-equitable, let alone a gender-neutral, version of the language. Rather than resolve gender inequity first, as suggested by Viennot, French-speaking authors such as Alpheratz¹¹ and other genderqueer individuals in the French-speaking blogosphere have begun to put pressure on the French language by promoting neologisms such as *iel*, *al*, *ille* or *yel* (a combination of *il* and *elle* that indicates a non-binary or gender nonconforming subject)

III. Creating a trans-inclusive linguistic space: Assignée garçon

In order to map out more broadly this nascent francophone trans movement for linguistic change, I would like to consider another political and national context other than the French one by turning to the work of Sophie Labelle, a Québécoise online artist whose web comic, [Assignée garçon](#), creates space for trans and non-binary subjects by deploying some newly invented linguistic elements including pronouns (*iel*) adjectives (*celleux*) and other neologisms (*transitude*, *mégender*).¹² Labelle's work is particularly useful as she has also produced an English version, [Assigned Male](#), offering a rare case study that allows us to compare the narrative in English and highlight the challenges in the French medium by comparison. Of Francophone Québécois origin, Sophie Labelle, who started as a trans activist, began to use her

¹⁰Viennot concludes her remarkable book with the following paragraphs: “Je voudrais terminer ce propos par une remarque plus philosophique. *La langue française, j’espère l’avoir montré, n’est pas sexiste [...] En revanche, elle est genrée. Inéluctablement. Et elle ne connaît que deux genres. Elle s’oppose ainsi aux désirs de celles et ceux qui voudraient ne pas être identifiées comme femme ou homme - et cela quel que soit leur sexe anatomique.* Elle contrarie les rêves des partisan·es de « l’indifférence des sexes » ... dont je suis. *Il me semble pourtant que l’effort pour faire reculer la masculinisation de notre langue, effort qui passe par la réintroduction de la visibilité des agentes féminines et de leur représentation dans l’ensemble du matériel linguistique disponible (noms, pronoms, adjectifs, participes...) est prioritaire, comme celle pour obtenir la parité, qui exige effectivement d’insister sur la différence des sexes. L’indifférence viendra plus tard. Et si elle ne vient pas, du moment que nous avons l’égalité, quelle importance ?*” (111, emphasis added).

¹¹ A linguist and author of *Requiem* (2015), Alpheratz is a GNC individual who created a non-binary system with pronouns such as “al” that do not privilege the masculine gender. For reasons of space, I am not able to develop a full discussion of their work. Florence Ashley in this issue devotes substantial space to discussing Alpheratz’s contributions to expanding GNC linguistic space in French.

¹² For instance, Labelle responds to a Facebook user’s question regarding the difference between *transitude* and *transidentité*, which, for the artist, describes: “l’état d’être trans. Le terme “transidentité” est inutilisé au Québec (d’ailleurs la transitude de quelqu’un n’est pas une identité en soi alors j’ai jamais compris)” ([Facebook comment](#) 26 October 2017).

artistic skills to publish Web comics both in English and in French (thus becoming one of the exemplars of Canada's official bilingual policy!) with this series in 2014. Labelle also self-publishes [print and PDF versions](#) of comic books, which consist of material from the web comics assembled into broad story arcs. At the Vassar Symposium held in April 2018, Labelle explained that she creates much of her work first in English, and then proceeds to work on versions in both languages. The majority of her audience remains Anglophone (162,000 “likes” on Facebook; 38,000 for the French version as of January 2019).¹³ Perhaps for this reason, many of the themes and narrative arcs followed by *Assignée garçon* reflect a distinctly North American perspective on matters to do with identity politics. However, there is a sizable following of her production in French, both in Canada and France.

In the very first panel of this ongoing series (Figures 1 and 2), as the self-named “Gender Pirates” introduce themselves, we are confronted with the pronoun “problem” along with that of non-binary gender identification.

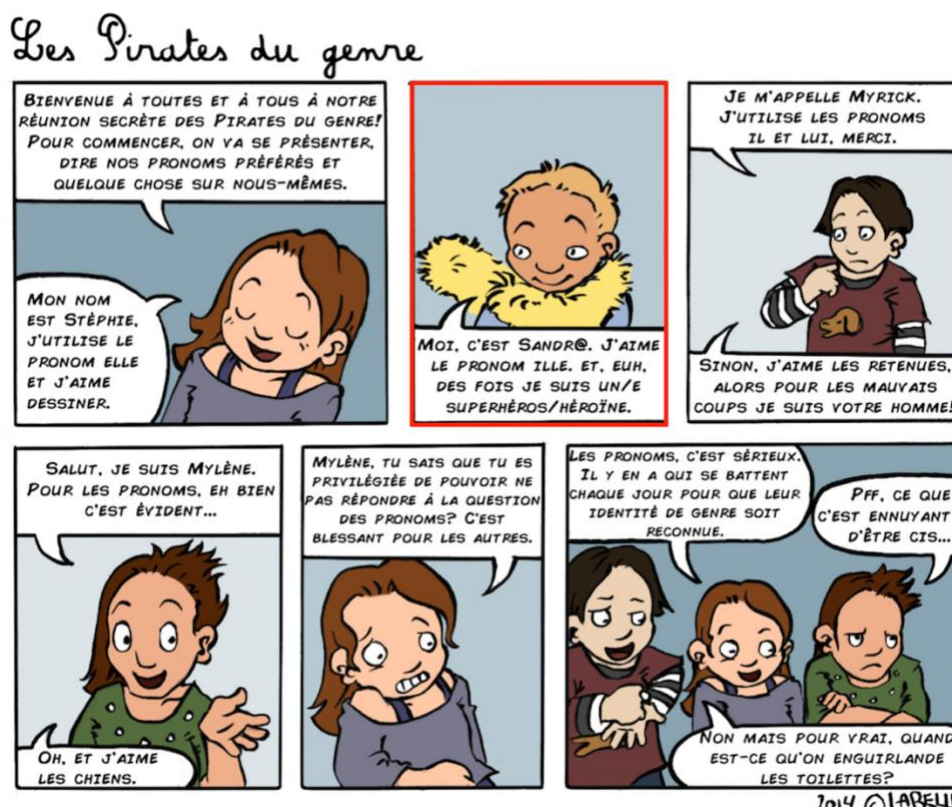


Figure 1 The [Introductory Panel](#) of *Assignée garçon* by Sophie Labelle (My emphasis [frame in red]; the English version of this panel is no longer available online). Reproduced with permission © Sophie Labelle 2019.

¹³ Of course, as with others who have challenged prevailing world views, Sophie Labelle, too, has been subject to an unusual amount of online verbal and symbolic violence, that even prompted [the cancellation of a public event](#) organized in 2017 in Halifax, Nova Scotia, for the release of her comic book following vicious online attacks and death threats (MacCharles 2017).

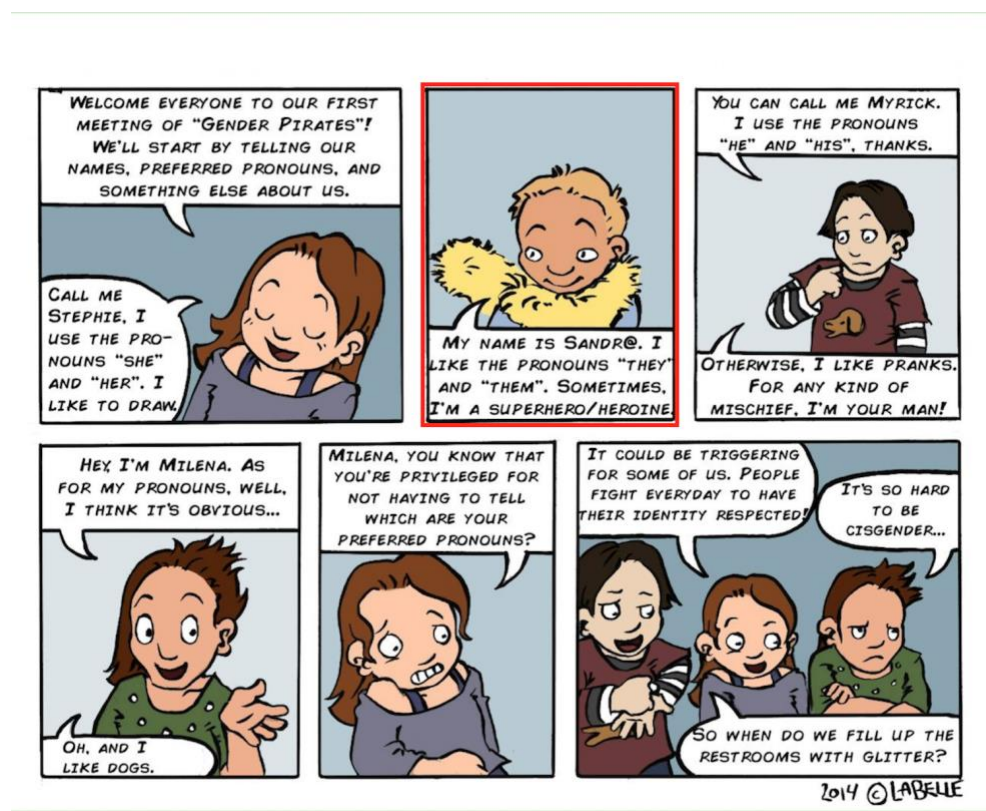


Figure 2 The [Introductory Panel](#) of *Assignée garçon* by Sophie Labelle (Labelle (My emphasis [frame in red]); this English version is no longer available online). Reproduced with permission © Sophie Labelle 2019.

Although the principal character, Stéphanie, an 11-year old trans kid, identifies with the feminine gender, her friend Sandr@, does not identify either with the conventional masculine or feminine subject positions. Immediately, we are confronted with two issues. First, how to refer to this person in the oral register, but also, and importantly, the need to create a new non-binary pronoun, “*ille*” in this case. In the English version, of course, while Sandr@ remains an oral conundrum, “they,” and “them” adopted as a third person singular likely stands out in a less conspicuous manner, especially as North American readers are more and more familiar with this formulation, and was even legitimized by the [2017 Associated Press style guide change](#) in recognition of demands for neutral pronouns made by gender nonconforming individuals. The Web comic proceeds to document various didactic and often humorous situations to teach its readers how to negotiate a world with non-binary people, and how their families and friends do so. Here are a few examples.

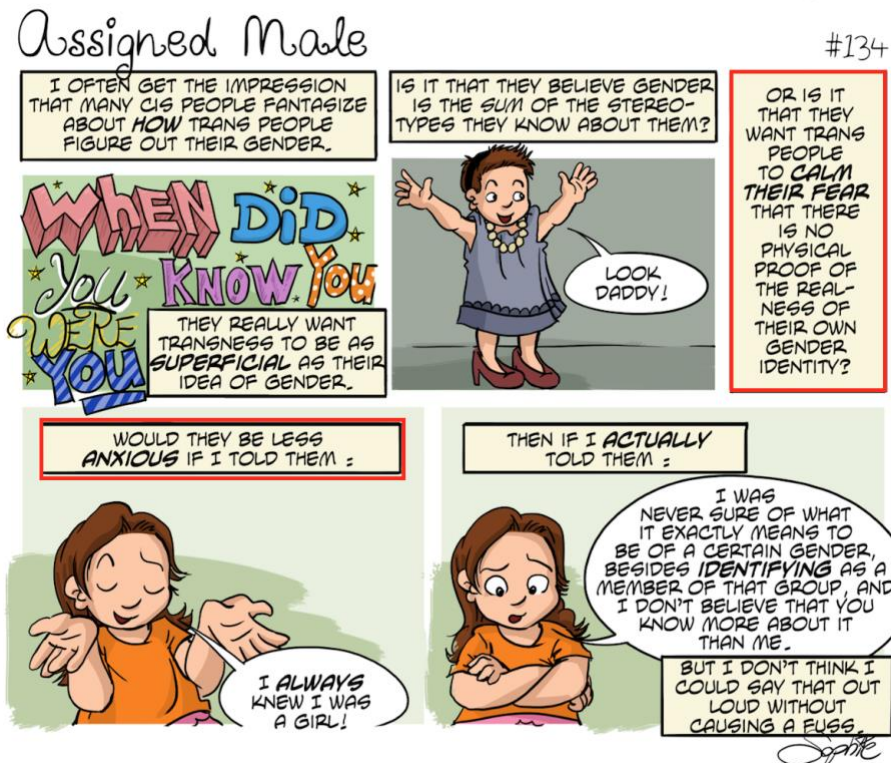
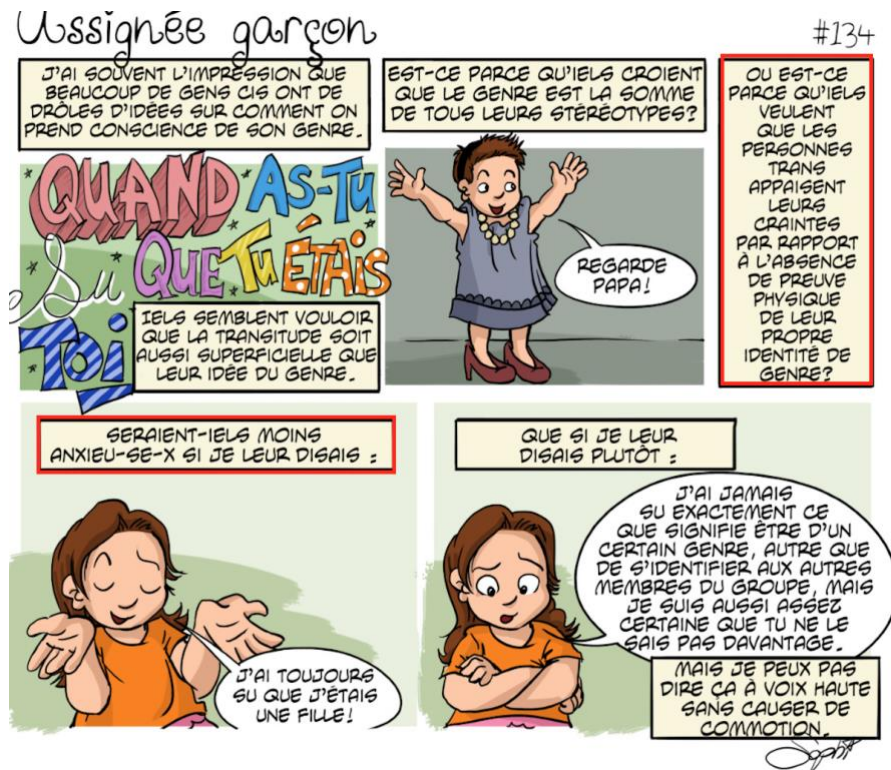


Figure 3 and 4. Example of the gender-neutral pronouns and adjectives ([French: #134](#) ; [English: #134](#); my emphasis [frames in red]). Reproduced with permission © Sophie Labelle 2019.

In Figures 3 and 4 above, Stéphanie, Labelle's main character who identifies as a girl, is reflecting on why the cis-gendered world fantasizes "about how trans people figure out their gender." (Note that in the French, the ubiquitous "on" does the differentiating work without naming the non-cis, i.e., trans, group). In third and the fourth frame of the French version of the panel, Labelle uses the pronoun "*iels*" and adjective "*anxieu-se-x*" to designate a gender-inclusive third person plural, mirroring the English version which uses the gender neutral plural pronoun "they", and the adjective "anxious," which does not need to be modified. Moreover, this panel highlights some of the inherent differences in approaches to inclusivity available in to the two languages. When Labelle refers to a generalized plural of individuals, she uses "they" in English, which, in its conventional gender-neutral plural—and thus linguistically normative—connotation, is most often read as cis-normative. Whereas, in the French, the use of "*iels*", a linguistically innovative gender-inclusive plural pronoun, acts to queer the designated cis normative (masculine) plural (and putatively gender neutral) subject "ils." In other words, Labelle queers the cis-normative plural in French in ways that cannot be done in English, short of using another neologism for a gender-inclusive "they" to indicate inclusion of both GNC and cis-normative individuals.¹⁴

In Labelle's comic world, it is not just the GNC or trans characters who make use of an expanded gender-inclusive vocabulary. In the following panels (Figures 5 and 6 below), the father of one of Stéphanie's friends confides with Stéphanie's mother that he is having a hard time grappling with the challenges of bringing up a non-binary child.

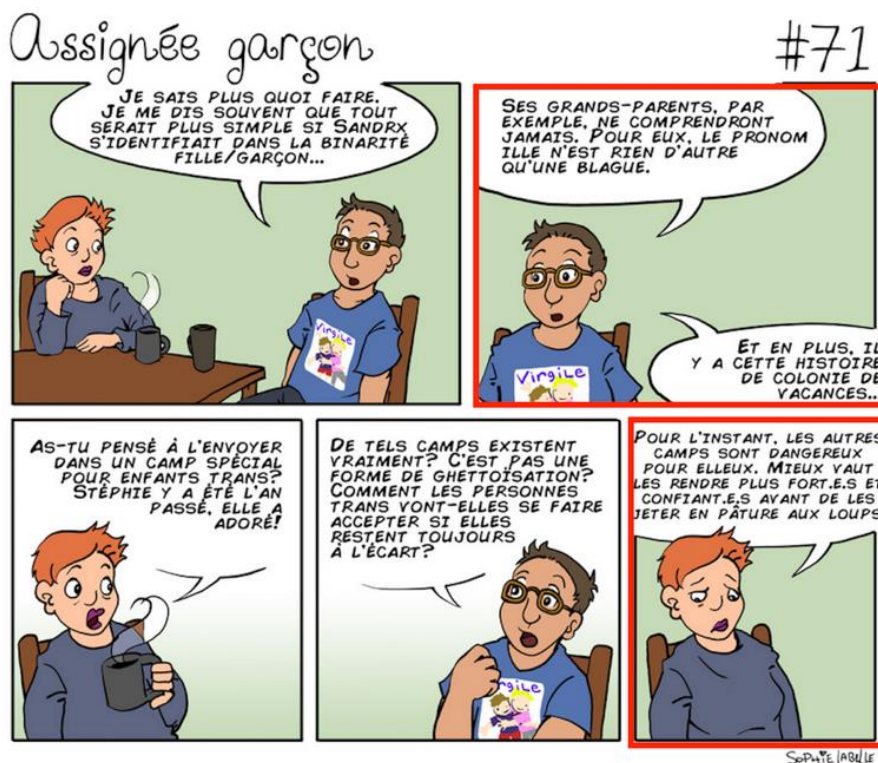


Figure 5. Stéphanie's mother and Sandrx's father discuss the challenges of parenting ([French version: #71](#); my emphasis [frames in red]). Reproduced with permission © Sophie Labelle 2019.

¹⁴ I thank Louisa Mackenzie for bringing this point to my attention.

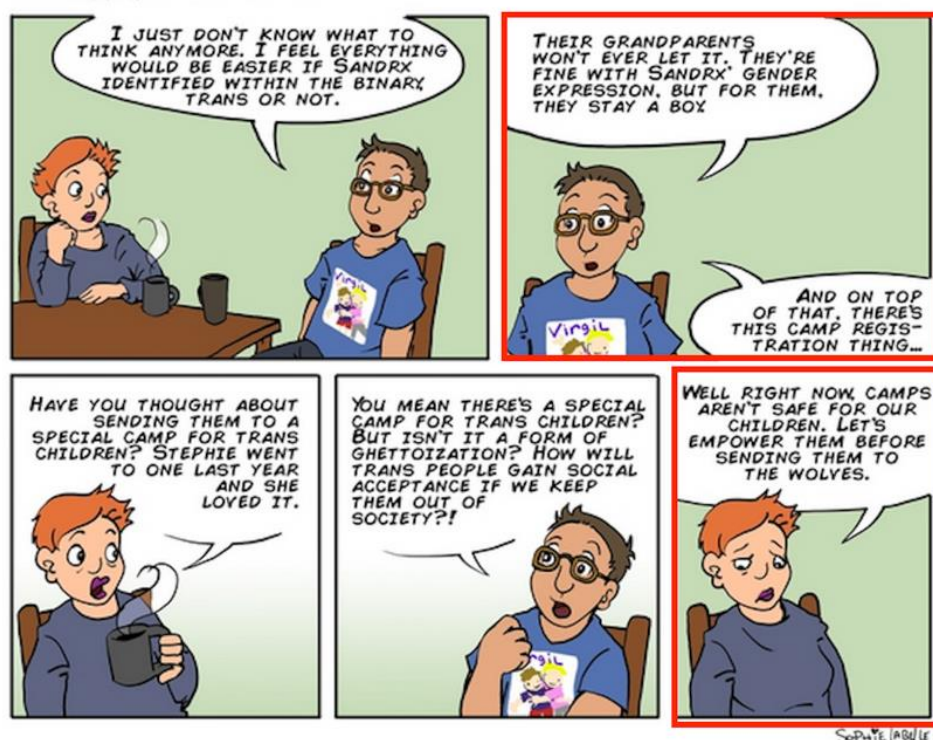


Figure 6. Stéphanie's mother and Sandrx's father discuss the challenges of parenting ([English version: #71](#); my emphasis [frames in red]). Reproduced with permission. © Sophie Labelle 2019.

The conversation between the two cis-gendered adults is nevertheless very respectful of Sandrx's gender identification (the character is also referred to in other panels as Sandr@),¹⁵ while the father laments the difficulty of having older members of the family take their pronoun choice seriously ("Pour eux ille n'est rien d'autre qu'une blague"). In the last two frames of the panel, Labelle deftly anticipates and undoes potential ideologically tinged critiques (*"communautarisme"* as it is often cast as in France) to the suggestion of a summer camp suited for trans kids. By reminding Sandrx's father and all readers that violence against gender nonconforming children is all too real, Stéphanie's mother reframes the issue to highlight that protecting trans children is not only well-founded (to "empower" them), but also necessary in order to change the status quo. Thus, undoubtedly Labelle's North-American-based experience and perspective is offered as a pragmatic defense to possible pushback based on French universalist ideals.

Labelle has continued to add, on average, two panels per week since she first started publishing the series in 2014. Even a more cursory and partial survey (see Appendix 1 at the end of this article) of the early years of Labelle's work (2014-2015) yields several such didactic and linguistically inclusive moments. Over 30 panels work in various neologisms, grammar elements

¹⁵In using these these non-binary alternatives to the masculine "Sandro," or feminine "Sandra," Labelle no doubt alludes to the gender-neutral alternatives "Latin@" or "Latinx" that have been popularized by activists and many scholars in North America. For more on the rise in popular use of "Latinx" see Ramirez and Blay's [2016 Huffington Post article](#).

(including gender-neutral pronouns, adjectives, etc) and *l'écriture inclusive* to render discourse and communication more inclusive all, be they cis, trans, or gender nonconforming.

While not all panels deal with linguistic challenges per se (see Figures 7 and 8 below) it becomes clear that for Sophie Labelle, and her characters, the invention and incorporation of various inclusive and neutral pronouns and determinants allow for strategic manipulation of the language to create a more gender equitable and inclusive world in which they hope to live.

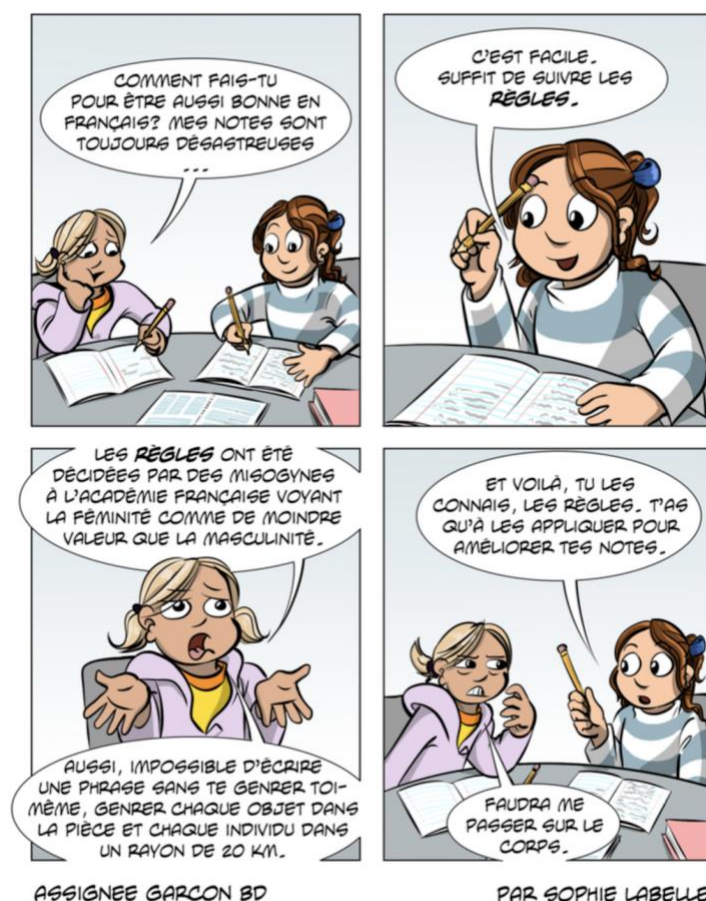


Figure 7. Stéphanie and Ciel discuss French existing Grammar rules ([French version](#)). Reproduced with permission © Sophie Labelle 2019.

Figure 7 (above) and Figure 8 (below) present an interesting discussion of the French language. The present set of grammar rules are quite clearly critiqued as sexist, and Labelle lays the responsibility squarely at the feet of institutions such as the *Académie française*. Yet, the concession that Stéphanie recommends is not to be read as acceptance, but rather strategic (“apply them and you’ll get good grades”), as a means to an end. Thus, this panel articulates Labelle’s larger approach of engaging with the French language in discrete if incisive ways that further her goal of educating her readership on how it should be normative to be inclusive and supportive of

trans and GNC individuals.



Figure 8. Stéphanie and Ciel discuss French existing Grammar rules ([English version](#)). Reproduced with permission © Sophie Labelle 2019.

IV. Systemic approaches and why they might matter

Let me turn to another approach, this time system(at)ic, proposed by the gender nonconforming author of the blog formerly known as “Unique en son genre” (since mid 2018, this blog post is hosted by [La vie en queer](#) blog [LVEQ]), which is much more linguistically sophisticated. In the following tables (Figures 9 and 10), the author suggests a systematic change to allow for gender-neutral and -inclusive variants:

<http://uniqueensongenre.eklablog.fr>

Mots	Masculin	Féminin	Neutre	Inclusif
Articles définis/COD	le	la	lo / lu	li / lia
Articles indéfinis	un	une	um / o	unæ [un-ne]
Articles partitifs	du	de la	do	di
Pronoms sujets	il	elle	ille ul / ol im / em / iem æ / ael / aël i eul ya am / um / om ax / ux / ox	iel (yel)
Pronoms compléments	lui	elle	ille / ul / im / ...	ellui / iel
	eux	elles	eus	euxes / elleux
Déterminants possessifs	mon / ton / son	ma / ta / sa	man / tan / san	maon / taon / saon
Pronoms possessifs	mien	mienne	miem	miæn [mien-ne]
Déterminants démonstratifs	cet / ce	cette	cet / cès	cet / cèx (glamour ^^)
	celui	celle	cille / çul / cim / ...	célui (cellui) / ciel (cyel)
	ceux	celles	ceus	ceuxes / celleux

Figure 9. Linguistic expansion [proposal](#) for gender-neutral & -inclusive variants.

<http://uniqueensongenre.eklablog.fr>

Masculin	Féminin	Neutre	Inclusif
Il est beau	Elle est belle	Ille est beaus	Iel est beaux
Celui qui fait la queue semble mécontent	Celle qui fait la queue semble mécontente	Cille qui fait la queue semble mécontans	Célui qui fait la queue semble mécontenx
Il va avec eux	Elle va avec elles	Ille va avec eus	Iel va avec euxes
Il a vu un garçon si mignon qu'il en était confus	Elle a vu une fille si mignonne qu'elle en était confuse	Ille a vu o fim si mignom qu'ille en était confusse	Iel a vu unæ fi si mignonx qu'iel en était confuxe
Le jardinier est petit	La jardinière est petite	Lo jardiniér est petis	Li jardini est petix

Figure 10. Examples with different [proposed gender variants](#).

First, we should note that this approach advocates for a clear difference to be made between gender-neutral (no particular gender privileged; third person subject pronoun *ille*) and gender-inclusive (non-binary subjects included and acknowledged; third-person subject pronoun *iel*) forms.¹⁶ It also becomes immediately apparent from the examples above, that the very nature of

¹⁶ In contrast, in English, the pronoun “they” is used for both gender-neutral and -inclusive forms. The use of “they/their” as a gender-neutral pronoun has become well-established, especially in the spoken form in which it is often used to indicate not a (non-binary) gender, but

the current linguistic, and perhaps semantic, norms from pronunciation to grammar and connotation, is being challenged and changed in both the oral and written registers. Unless already alerted to gender variants, “Iel a vu unæ fi si mignonx qu’iel en était confuxe” is neither visually nor aurally legible for most French speakers. In other words, unlike Viennot, the remedy being suggested is no longer rooted in the purely historical linguistic domain. Simply put, at this point, although I admire their clearly logical approach to equitable representation, and admittedly LVEQ presents their work as “in progress,” mass acceptance of such re-codification nevertheless remains idealistic at best in the present political and cultural context.

Yet, recognizing the work done by this approach to create a space for mutual respect alerts us to an underlying question, for much like the best practices advocated by Viennot and other signatories of the November 2017 manifesto, any systemic change such as the one advocated by LVEQ, too, has to contend with the much more rugged terrain of cultural and political considerations. For social institutions exercising authority over the French do so over a language that is not just a vernacular of Western Europe that it once was prior to the 17th century. Rather, French is most importantly the language of the State, the language that constitutes the State, just as much as the State constitutes the modern French language. Here, a longer version of this discussion would consider the interventions made by philosophers and historians such as Jacques Derrida and Etienne Balibar,¹⁷ to articulate the importance of the role of language control and allied policies in the construction of the nation on the one hand and the self on the other. For our purposes, however, one can distill from those interventions that the structure of the nation is dependent on the creation of a nuclear heteronormative family model as its building block; and this nation form has always-already been cis-gendered.

Furthermore, in this context, it is important to note that the French language has been cast into its consolidating mission since 1635 when Richelieu founded the *Académie française* as a means of channeling and corralling hitherto disparate aristocratic power to create the early modern centralized French State. Ever since, that powerful and male-dominated institution¹⁸ has had an enormous impact on the form of the language, which, as is well-recognized, is one of the primary unifying institutional tools for the French national project. Yet, and perhaps because of its embodied sexism, it has also become the object of stringent critique from both feminist activists such as Viennot and those, like Sophie Labelle and the author of UESG, who wish for a more supple gender-neutral or -inclusive language.

an unknown gender, as in the following instance: “Someone left their phone, I hope they come back for it.” Whereas in the following example, “Sandra is non-binary, *they* prefer they/them pronouns,” “they” indicates a non-binary third person singular subject. The AP style guide clarifies these two contexts (Andrews 2017).

¹⁷ See for instance, Etienne Balibar (1991) and Jacques Derrida (1996).

¹⁸ According to the [Académie française](#), of the 732 *immortels* elected since 1635, a mere 9 have been women, the first of whom, Marguerite Yourcenar, was elected in 1980.

For reasons mentioned above, in France (and for much of the Francophone world)¹⁹, this institution is also the ultimate body that deliberates on and decides on any orthographic or syntactical reform without which any movement to legitimize neologisms or new linguistic expressions is effectively deemed illegitimate. In the 2017 debate on *l'écriture inclusive*, the Prime Minister's [21 November circular](#) that I mentioned before, and which forbade State employees from using certain forms in official communication, relied heavily on and mirrored the authority projected by the *Académie française*.

In notable contrast, the [Office Québécois de la langue française](#) seems to be much more amenable to the kinds of change advocated by Sophie Labelle and other trans activists, as is indicated by a page [published in 2018](#) that explicitly grapples with how to address non-binary persons. It recommends many of the same practices including the use of the *épïcène* (nouns that apply to people of all genders, even though the term itself, such as “*personne*,” has an assigned gender (feminine), advocated by the proponents of *écriture inclusive*. It also neutrally notes certain neologisms for pronouns (*ul* or *ol* instead of *il* or *elle* for instance) or “*fræur* ou *freure* en remplacement de *frère/sœur*, ou *tancle* en remplacement de *tante/oncle*” but stops short of sanctioning or explicitly legitimizing their use.

Yet, in the case of the *Académie française*, even with the prestige and authority that are symbolically conferred on the body, the institution finds itself in a predicament in its attempt to curtail linguistic innovation. For instance, it was with great fanfare that the *Académie*'s decision to no longer require the circumflex accent over i's and u's, approved after long debate around 1990, was finally moved for adoption by the ministry of education in France in 2016, that is to say, 26 years later, prompting the satirical weekly *Le Canard enchaîné* to publish the following front page headline (Figure 11):



Figure 11. The front page of [Le Canard enchaîné](#), 10 February 2016.

¹⁹ See for instance, the [Organisation internationale de la francophonie](#) (OIF), which seeks to promote French as a global language of communication, and has 54 states as full members, 7 with associate membership status, and 27 nations that have been accorded observer status. A search for “*écriture inclusive*” on the Website of the linguistic arm of the OIF, the [Observatoire de la langue française](#), yields no result.

Visually highlighting the second half of its headline, “Suppression du circonflexe sur le u et le i, mais pas sur le ô; pas de chance, l’accent va rester sur le chômage !”, the editors of the newspaper adroitly bridge for the reader two very different semantic and substantive fields. By using their renowned biting satirical tone and clever play on the word “*l’accent*”, they are able to pivot to note the relative superficiality of the State’s obsession with control over language, while substantive matters such as severe unemployment in France remain unresolved. Of course, the supreme irony is that this headline appears in a newspaper much-heralded as a (left-wing) bastion of “elegant” (read “correct”) French. Unstated but apparent from this article, is the Académie’s lack of ability to enforce their rulings, that is to say a waning of its self-promoting power.

Yet, if it took French society almost three decades to nominally accept a change in the use of non-essential accents, pushing through changes of the kind that blogger of LVEQ has proposed would face a monumental challenge for multiple reasons: the adoption of this systemic approach effectively demands new pronunciation, new syntax and new semantics, all of which imply much higher cultural and political hurdles posed by resistance from State actors such as the public school—that ultimate tool for nation building—and non-State actors including business enterprises, individuals and associations hostile to trans and gender nonconforming individuals.²⁰ Nevertheless, let us not shut down innovative proposals for solutions in light of the presently mandatory steep rappelling, let alone uphill political climb, that would be needed to accomplish the end goal of such inclusive communication. To mix metaphors, doing so would be akin to throwing the proverbial baby out with the bath water. We know that all languages, innovate, evolve, and borrow from others, rendering the notion of a pure language to be an empty concept.²¹

Regarding the policing for supposed purity of the use of existing language,²² it is not by accident that the Académie maintains a Web site, which warns us of the unacceptable influence of the English language in a section explicitly titled “Dire, ne pas dire” with the interdiction “*ne pas*” highlighted in red (Figure 12), and in which Anglicisms that the French public adopts are regularly singled out over and separated from other neologisms:

²⁰ For further detail, see Florence Ashley’s contribution to this special issue.

²¹ In 2006, Tahar Ben Jelloun demonstrated this most elegantly, when, in response to the far-right’s demand for immigrants to be sent back “home”, he wrote *Le dernier immigré*, a fable published in *Le monde diplomatique*, and set in the future when the French President personally sees to the departure from French soil of the last Maghrebi immigrant. The population begins to notice a strange phenomenon that leaves them tongue-tied unable to express themselves, and the so called “Français de souche” slowly begin to understand that with the departure of the last immigrant, many words adopted from the Arabic into French, like *orange* and *café*, that they had taken to be an integral part of their own language, also left the land.

²² Article 24 of the founding bylaws of the institution state: “La principale fonction de l’Académie sera de travailler, avec tout le soin et toute la diligence possibles, à donner des règles certaines à notre langue et à la rendre *pure*, éloquente et capable de traiter les arts et les sciences” (“[les missions](#),” Academie-francaise.com, my emphasis).



The screenshot shows the Académie Française website. At the top, there is a logo with a dome and the text 'DIRE, NE PAS DIRE' and 'ACADÉMIE FRANÇAISE'. Below this, the article title 'Crush pour Béguin' is displayed, dated 'Le 5 juillet 2018', and categorized under 'Néologismes & anglicismes'. The article text discusses the English verb 'to crush' and its French equivalents, including 'craquer pour quelqu'un' and 'béguin'. A table compares 'On dit' (what is said) with 'On ne dit pas' (what is not said). On the right side, there is a sidebar with links like 'Recherche', 'Par titre', 'Par rubrique', and 'Par parution'.

On dit	On ne dit pas
Avoir un petit faible, un penchant pour quelqu'un ; en pincer pour quelqu'un, avoir le béguin pour quelqu'un	Avoir un crush pour quelqu'un

Figure 12. [Dire, Ne pas Dire](http://dire.nepasdire.academiefrancaise.fr), Académiefrançaise.fr.

Although it is important to acknowledge the hegemonic influence of the English language, the fact that the *Académie française* sees the need to explicitly separate out neologisms from Anglicisms indicates the size of the perceived threat coming from across the channel and the ocean. That the didactic information is presented in the form of correctional commands (“*on dit*,” “*on ne dit pas*”) belies the ultimate failure of this institution’s ability to exercise its authority effectively over a general population that disregards the *Académie*’s imperative not to use anglicisms and instead has proceeded to adopt dozens of foreign (many, if not most, of which are from English) words wholeheartedly—including *crush* (pictured above), *weekend*, *parking* and *mail*—on a regular basis in all but the most formal of venues. As my colleagues and fellow contributors show, over the years, there have been a variety of challenges to the rigidity associated with the bi-gendered nature of the French language, and innovation and creativity are an intrinsic part of linguistic nature.

Conclusion

So, where does this leave American professors of the French language, at least this one, with trans students wishing for nonconforming gender-neutral pronouns? Returning to Alexandre Baril’s lament about the current impasse in the Francophone context, which makes it hard to move beyond “the dichotomy between inclusive and exclusionary/transphobic feminism” (45), I am encouraged by artists such as Sophie Labelle who have taken an innovative and (even if inadvertent) didactic approach that models linguistically inclusive gestures while judiciously suggesting the adoption of certain pronouns, in order to make that significant leap from recognition to legitimization of gender nonconforming subjectivities.

I freely admit that while I am likely to read Labelle’s work with my students in my classroom, I am not quite at the point of using LVEQ’s alternative grammar tables. However, there is no doubt that these concerted attempts and logical linguistic experiments by non-institutional activists and artists in the blogosphere have begun to reveal in the public domain the needs and desires of a segment of Francophone population that were hitherto invisible. Whether this is

evidence of the cross-pollination of ideas that might be at play in the construction of gender nonconforming identities on both sides of the Atlantic's geo-cultural and -linguistic divide is in a sense immaterial, though by all accounts (see other contributions in this special issue) several attempts to create space for the voices of gender nonconforming individuals have appeared over time both in France and in North America. Ultimately, as even traditionalists such as the linguist and lexicographer Alain Rey²³ have conceded, "c'est l'usage qui a raison" ([Chemin 2017](#)). As with all such statements, only time will tell, for sure. But the verity of such statements, the work of Sophie Labelle and her activist friends reminds us, is also crucially predicated on us collectively allowing all voices to be heard.

²³ Citing lack of "consensus," among other issues, Rey very publicly [dismissed many aspects](#) of *l'écriture inclusive* and the feminists' demand for linguistic *parité* as destined for failure and stated: "On a complètement confondu, me semble-t-il, les «signes» et les «choses». Le masculin et le féminin dans la grammaire française ne sont pas liés à l'espèce humaine" ([Develey 2017](#)). On 28 February 2019, the *Académie française* finally adopted the recommendations of an [internal report](#) to allow for feminizations of titles and professions (écrivaine, cheffe, professeure, autrice, etc.)—one of the major recommendations of *l'écriture inclusive*—which were already in use in Canada, and to a lesser extent in Belgium and Switzerland. However, as Bernard Cerquiligni (2019) rightly notes, the institution has shown great reluctance to change and still seems to prefer the notion that in many contexts, the masculine gender is sufficient to express the unmarked, neutral position («masculin neutre, ou non marqué»).

Appendix 1 ²⁴

A sampling of 32 pages (from 2014-2015) from Labelle's Assignée garçon in which she uses inclusive pronouns and other linguistic innovations. Row 1 states figures for total number of occurrences.

Page-FR	Point grammatical					Difficulté	Autres	Circonstance	Lien Français
	Ille(s)	Iel(s)	Elleux	Celleux	Ecriture inclusive				
31	9	2	3	1	17	4	4	32	33
1	X							Présentation personnelle : "Moi c'est Sandr@"	http://bit.ly/2kUn3j4
34	X					X	Sandr@ aussi écrit "Sandrx"	Fonctionne lorsqu' il est écrit mais comment le prononcer?	http://bit.ly/2mfAZ7C
71	X		X					Grands-parents de Sandr@ pense que le pronom "ille" est une "blague"	http://bit.ly/2lDsksy
72								Cf p. 99	http://bit.ly/2lDI7lY
73	X							Sandr@ se sent heureux-se quand pronom "ille" est employé pour elle	http://bit.ly/2m8JGxf
Un court guide d'inclusion	X		X					Explication sur les manières d'inclure des personnes transgenres en classe. NB. Pronom employé non pas pour parler des personnes non-binaires mais pour éviter la règle du masculin l'emporte sur le féminin.	http://bit.ly/1RcLZrj
Pourquoi... quand on me mégenre	X							Pronom employé non pas pour parler des personnes non-binaires mais pour éviter la règle du masculin l'emporte sur le féminin	http://bit.ly/2l7DTWV
76	X			X				Conversation sur la question des toilettes neutres	http://bit.ly/2lhrKiX
Inquiétudes des parents d'enfants trans					X			Ambivalence: utilisé pour personnes transgenres ou pour parler en général en évitant la règle du masculin l'emporte sur le féminin	http://bit.ly/2kUvriK
91	X							Demande les pronoms	http://bit.ly/2lDrUm5
99					X			Nouveau nom de Sandr@ qui s'appelle Ciel désormais. Réflexion sur les raisons de ce nouveau nom p.72	http://bit.ly/2lNudoL
100						X	"Empowerer"	Emploi d'un mot/concept non traduit	http://bit.ly/2mfxxz4W
103						X		"Tu le/la trouves mignon.ne" : certains pronoms n'ont pas encore été inventés	http://bit.ly/2lhgzKJ
134		X						Pronom employé non pas pour parler des personnes non-binaires mais pour éviter la règle du masculin l'emporte sur le féminin	http://bit.ly/2kUHKeH
135					X			"La.e dentiste", parce qu'on ne connaît pas le genre du/ de la dentiste	http://bit.ly/2mkV898
157					X			"Les ami-e-s de Stéphanie sont toujours les bienvenu-e-s". On ne connaît pas le genre	http://bit.ly/2lhGu1e

²⁴ I thank Baptiste Genevée-Grisolia, my student assistant in spring 2017, for helping me compile this data.

Page-FR	Point grammatical					Difficulté	Autres	Circonstance	Lien Français
	Ille(s)	Iel(s)	Elleux	Celleux	Ecriture inclusive				
31	9	2	3	1	17	4	4	32	33
165					X			"Tu seras blessé.e ou rejeté.e". On ne connaît pas le genre de la personne trans	http://bit.ly/2INIUsP
169		X			X			"Il y a mes ami-e-s proches qui savent que je préfère le pronom "iel". "ami-e-s" on ne connaît pas le genre, "iel" parce que non binaire	http://bit.ly/2kUAVKI
172					X			deprimé-e → personne non binaire	http://bit.ly/2IhliHE
174					X			isolé.e, défendu.e → personne non binaire	http://bit.ly/2kUHT1N
188	X							"Illes font ça pour de vrai" → pour éviter le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin quand on parle d'hommes et femmes	http://bit.ly/2IDADED
190			X			X		"elleux" qui réfère à de "potentiels alliés". Néanmoins, alors que le pronom "elleux" a pour but d'éviter "masculin l'emporte sur le féminin", on ne retrouve pas d'écriture inclusive pour "potentiels alliés"	http://bit.ly/2mtctMs
200					X			"élèves marginalisé.e.s" → pour éviter que le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin	http://bit.ly/2kUvyL6
205					X			"être gai.e c'est être attiré.e". on remarquera qu'en français de France, le mot gay est orthographié à l'anglaise "gay". Il n'y a donc pas besoin d'écriture inclusive	http://bit.ly/2IRYHpS
206					X			Pour éviter que le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin	http://bit.ly/2IRKf0Y
207					X			Pour éviter que le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin	http://bit.ly/2kUISPX
210					X			Pour éviter que le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin	http://bit.ly/2IRZabC
227					X			"aîné-e", pour que le masculin ne l'emporte pas sur le féminin	http://bit.ly/2mfGvXK
242					X			Discussion sur l'inclusion des genres à l'école	http://assigneegarcon.tumblr.com/post/149415249300
293					X				http://bit.ly/2IDIWQR
					X			être seul-e	http://bit.ly/2mfKluF
							X	"la transitude"	https://bit.ly/2DMaGgl
229							X	"déplacarder" Ciel aux étrangers	http://bit.ly/2oD6TMp

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