

The Feminization of French Profession Words

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Abstract

In France, as in many other countries, women represent a significant part of the work force and occupy fields previously exclusive to men. However, in the French language many masculine profession, function and title words do not have a feminine equivalent. The situation is complicated since not only are there controversies over which form of the noun to use to denote women, but there is considerable variation in the use of articles and adjectives used along with these nouns. Feminization is largely a social issue; many argue that without it French is a sexist language, while others believe that the feminine forms are derogatory and should not be used. In this paper I outline the use of masculine and feminine nouns and articles to denote professionals, examine arguments both in favor of and against the feminization of masculine nouns, and provide the official opinions of several French language authorities. I then analyze the results of a survey in which I ask French speakers of both French and foreign origin to provide masculine and feminine forms of profession words. I also introduce the broader issue of the androcentrism of the French language that goes far beyond the semantic category of profession. *

1 Introduction

In today's global society, women have a larger presence in the work force than they did in the past and they have risen to high positions in all kinds of professions. Yet in French many profession words lack a feminine form, and there is enormous variation

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in the nouns used to denote women of different occupations. I am interested in the reasons for this gap between reality and language; why are there still no widely accepted ways to denote women of certain professions? Historically, the feminine form of a profession word was frequently used to designate a woman who was married to a man of that vocation (Dio 2001:148), although the woman did often hold the same job herself (Becquer 1999:14). Now more feminine forms are needed for all the different positions that women hold themselves. The choice between denoting women with grammatically masculine words and feminizing these masculine words is currently a linguistic and social controversy in France as well as in other French-speaking countries. In this thesis I focus on the use of professional nouns and titles among fluent French speakers.

The reader should keep in mind that I use examples from several sources, not all of which agree on the acceptable masculine and feminine forms of each word. Let this serve to further reveal the absence of widely-accepted standard rules and forms.

2 Gender and Sexism in French

Gender in French is binary: masculine and feminine. All nominals have gender. Articles, adjectives, and participles agree with the gender of their nominal referent and pronouns gain their gender from the nominal they modify. There are several ways to distinguish masculine and feminine forms of a nominal. First of all, the distinction can be lexical so that each gender has a completely separate word, as in *un homme/une femme** ‘man’/‘woman’ (keep reading for an explanation of my use of the symbol *). Secondly, the distinction can be morphological, as in *un cousin/une cousine** ‘cousin.’ Finally, there are so-called epicene nominals that have the same form for both genders.

In this case, the distinction may be made by the gender of the article, as in *un pacifiste/une pacifiste* ‘pacifist,’ or the same article may be used for both, as in *un amateur* ‘amateur, enthusiast,’ leaving the distinction up to context. (Vogel 1997:26) In almost all cases the gender distinction is not just orthographic but also phonetic; the fact that the differences can be heard means that the gender distinction is present in every conversation about profession, which explains the intensity of the debate over feminization. In this paper I have placed an asterisk like so* after the feminine form when I provide a masculine and feminine word pair that can be distinguished auditorily (but not if the auditory distinction is solely between masculine and feminine articles).

The French language has long been criticized for being androcentric, particularly because the masculine is grammatically dominant and is considered to be the default gender. When there is a plural subject, the pronoun is always the masculine *ils* as long as there is one man, even if women outnumber men. For example, when describing a group of three women and one man someone would say *Ils sont heureux* ‘They are happy,’ where both the article and the adjective are in the masculine form. Sentences describing nature, such as *il neige* ‘it is snowing,’ use the masculine *il*, and other gender-neutral phrases such as *il est nécessaire* ‘it is necessary’ always use the masculine *il*. The word *homme* is used as a gender-neutral term with a meaning supposedly akin to that of “human,” but is a gender-loaded term (Mercier 2002:489). I have been taught in French language classes that a question for which the answer is obviously feminine must be asked in the masculine; for example, in a class of all women the professor would still ask *Qui est absent?* ‘Who is absent?’ although the feminine form would be *absente*. There is also a semantic disconnect between the connotations of some masculine and feminine

forms that is often construed as lexical sexism. The feminine form of an adjective or noun can be derogatory even when the masculine form is not. For example, the adjective *galant/galante** means ‘well-brought-up’ when describing a man but ‘easy’ when describing a woman. (Moscovici 1997)

Although sometimes masculine terms are used to describe women, the lack of gender-specific forms goes both ways, as there are also cases in which feminine words are used for masculine subjects. For example, the very common word *une personne* ‘person,’ which can refer to someone of either gender, is always feminine. Some words denoting jobs that are stereotypically held by women, such as *une bonne* ‘maid,’ occur only in the feminine (Becquer 1999:124). Even a few military words that denote jobs typically thought of as masculine, such as *une sentinelle* ‘sentinel,’ are always feminine (Larivière 2001:23). Although this is not a common concern in the debate over feminizing, it is important to note that sometimes men are referred to by grammatically feminine words, just as women must at times refer to themselves with masculine words.

3 Rules for the Formation of Feminine Profession Words

Just as there are several possibilities for distinguishing the masculine and feminine forms of nouns, there is variation among the distinctions for profession words. The default is to have both masculine and feminine forms, usually morphological variants, such as *un serveur/une serveuse** ‘waiter’/‘waitress.’ However, there are cases in which several feminine suffixes present themselves as possibilities or in which profession words that are grammatically masculine refer to someone of either gender.

The guide Femme, j'écris ton nom: Guide d'aide à la féminisation des noms de métiers, titres, grades et fonctions 'Woman, I write your name: Guide to help with the feminization of nouns of occupations, titles, ranks and functions' (Becquer 1999) contains rules for the formation of feminine forms of profession words based on the ending of the masculine noun. This guide was written by the Institut National de la Langue Française (National Institute of the French Language) and the Comité de féminisation (Commission on feminization); it stemmed from a bill sponsored by then-prime minister Lionel Jospin. The bill's purpose was to determine for which words the feminine forms were in popular use and to advocate the use of those feminine forms. Many sources cite this work, and it is very thorough and supposedly based on the forms French speakers use. Therefore I use the rules in this guide to predict the feminine forms of the words in my survey and I compare my actual results to these predictions. In this section, however, my aim is simply to present the rules for the creation of feminine forms.

The guide states that whenever a noun denotes a woman, the article should always be feminine- that is, either the definite *la* or the indefinite *une* (Becquer 1999:22). This contrasts with what other sources say; most seem to agree that as is the case for other nouns, when profession nouns have the same masculine and feminine form they can either rely on the article, as in *le juge/la juge* 'judge,' or on context, as in *le professeur* 'teacher/professor,' to provide the gender of the referent. Femme, j'écris ton nom does have a pro-feminization bias which could explain why it always advocates a feminine article.

Context would help if a student says, for example, “*Notre professeur de maths est super*” (‘Our math teacher is awesome’), where the invariable forms of the possessive *notre*, the noun *professeur* and the adjective *super* do not provide clues as to the gender of the teacher. The listener, though, knows if the teacher is a man or a woman since the listener is in the same math class. In this case, context is helpful even if one is going by the rules of Femme, j’écris ton nom because if the teacher is a woman there is no way to distinguish that in the sentence, since there is only one form of the noun *professeur* and the possessive *notre* is invariable; a feminine article cannot be added.

When a masculine noun ends in –e, –a, –o, or –u, the feminine has the same form, as in *un géologue/une géologue* ‘geologist.’ When the masculine ends in –é, –i, or a consonant other than the –r in –eur, an –e is added to create the feminine form: *un député/une députée* ‘delegate/congressman,’ *un avocat/une avocate** ‘lawyer.’ Sometimes minor spelling changes occur, such as *un chirurgien/une chirurgienne** ‘surgeon’ or *un sportif/une sportive** ‘sportsman.’ There are also exceptions to this rule: sometimes the –e is optional as in *un médecin/une médecin(e*)* ‘doctor,’ and for certain words such as *un chef/une chef* ‘boss/chef’ the –e is not added. (Becquer 1999:22-4)

Masculine nouns ending in –eur but not –teur have two possibilities. They are changed to –euse when the noun corresponds semantically to a verb, as in *un programmeur/une programmeuse** ‘programmer’ (verb *programmer*), or when the root is a noun, as in *un camionneur/une camionneuse** ‘truck driver’ (noun *camion* ‘truck’). When the noun does not correspond semantically to a verb, the noun optionally takes on the ending –e, as in *un gouverneur/une gouverneur(e)* ‘governor.’ (Becquer 1999:24)

There are also two possibilities for masculine nouns ending in –teur, but the rules are more complicated. The feminine ending is –trice when there is a semantically corresponding verb with no –t in its ending (*un conducteur/une conductrice** ‘driver,’ verb *conduire*), when there is no semantically corresponding verb (*un aviateur/une aviatrice** ‘aviator’), when the verb arose after the noun (*un acteur/une actrice** ‘actor/actress,’ verb *acter*), or when there is a corresponding nominal ending in –tion, –ture, or –torat (*un éditeur/une éditrice** ‘publisher,’ nominal *édition*). The feminine ending is –teuse when the noun has a semantically corresponding verb with a –t in its ending and/or when there is no corresponding nominal in –tion, –ture, or –torat (*un acheteur/une acheteuse** ‘purchaser,’ verb *acheter*). (Becquer 1999:25)

Abbreviated forms have the same masculine and feminine, as in *un PDG (président-directeur-général)/une PDG* ‘executive.’ Explicitly masculine terms such as *frère* ‘brother’ are changed to their feminine counterparts in phrases, for example *un confrère/une consoeur** ‘colleague,’ where *frère* becomes *soeur* ‘sister.’ In complex forms involving multiple words, each word changes to its feminine form, if it has one, and adjectives become feminine whether or not the form of noun changes: *un président-directeur-général/ une présidente-directrice-générale** ‘executive,’ *un haut fonctionnaire/une haute fonctionnaire** ‘high-level civil servant.’ (Becquer 1999:26-7)

Foreign borrowings usually have identical masculine and feminine forms, as in *un clown/une clown* ‘clown.’ However, they can also be feminized according to either French rules or the rules of the language from which they were borrowed, as in *un torero/une torera** ‘bullfighter’ in which the Italian feminine ending is used. (Becquer 1999:26)

If there is not already an accepted feminine morphological variant, the only option in the past has been to use a masculine word to refer to a woman, which is often construed as sexist. Now many have turned to feminization, creating new and separate feminine forms for professions that currently use the same word for men and women. This phenomenon has only become widespread fairly recently (in the past few decades), and there is not yet a consensus on which forms to use for women of each profession.

One problem that arises from feminization is that there are no accepted norms yet, since the process is largely based on individual comfort levels. One woman might feel that the title *serveuse* ‘waitress’ demeans her work, whereas another would be offended if someone referred to her as a *serveur* ‘waiter.’ In order for a feminized form to catch on and become acceptable, enough people have to agree with both the idea of a feminized form and the new word itself. With the variety of feminine forms available, it is no doubt feminization will be an ongoing issue for years to come.

On the other hand, there are certain professions that have been traditionally held by women and therefore only a feminine form of that profession word exists, such as *une sagefemme* ‘midwife’ (Becquer 1999:124). Interestingly, women have been a strong presence in the field of teaching for a long time, yet no feminine form of *professeur* ‘teacher/professor’ exists; attempts to feminize the word have been unsuccessful (Ransbo 1992). As mentioned in section 2, some military terms are also feminine even when they apply to men, such as *une recrue* ‘recruit’ (Larivière 2001:23). So women are not the only ones who have to use profession nouns that do not match their gender.

In addition to the titles themselves, variation in articles and adjectives can lead to strange combinations such as the following sentences:

Madame le Ministre est belle.
title.f det.m minister.m is beautiful.f

Madame le Ministre est beau.
Title.f det.m minister.m is beautiful.m

(‘Madam Minister is beautiful.’) Either choice seems a contradictory combination of genders for the title, article, noun and adjective. (Dio 2001:149) However, according to Dio the profession word *ministre* has only one form for masculine and feminine, which includes the masculine article (Becquer (1999:22) instead considers *une ministre* to be the feminine form). On the other hand, a feminine form for the title *Monsieur* ‘Mister’ does exist. The question thus becomes: should the adjective agree with the title *Madame* or *ministre*? And if it agrees with *ministre*, should it agree semantically with the real-world gender of the referent (female), or grammatically with the gender of the noun (masculine)? I use this sentence in my survey, so refer to section 11 (survey results) for further discussion.

4 The Absence of Feminine Forms

Why do feminine forms not already exist if a masculine form exists? A social reason is that for certain positions, particularly in the government, a feminine form might not have been needed until recently because women did not hold that position.

Linguistically, several other problems may arise. The feminine form might already exist as a word but have a different meaning- sometimes an unrelated profession, as in *un entraîneur/une entraîneuse** ‘instructor’/‘taxi-girl,’ sometimes a machine that does a job or a noun closely related to that job, such as *un vitrier/une vitrière** ‘glass-cutter’/‘thin piece of metal, as for stained glass.’ In the case of *un graveur/une graveuse**, the

masculine form has a wider scope of meaning; it can mean ‘worker’ or ‘artist,’ whereas the feminine form only has the meaning ‘worker.’ Perhaps the feminine form exists but has a negative connotation, such as *un sauteur/une sauteuse** ‘acrobat’/‘woman of questionable morals.’ (Ransbo 1992:96-7) Remember, this problem also occurs with words that are not even in the semantic category of profession words, as previously stated in section 2.

Adding the new meaning of a professional woman would require turning words such as those above into homophones. The difficulty in accomplishing this would likely vary on a case-by-case basis. It might be easier if the word never referred to a woman at all (as in *vitrière*); the new feminine form could take on the same professional meaning as the masculine word. However, it would probably be harder to expand the meaning of a word such as *graveuse*, which already exists for women and has a different meaning than the masculine form, or *sauteuse*, since one would have to undo the negative connotation.

Finally, a peculiarity of the French language is that native speakers have a sense of euphony and prefer certain sequences of sounds over others; sometimes the general consensus is that a certain feminine form just does not sound right and is therefore unacceptable. For example, it is hard to find an acoustically satisfying feminine form for some complex words such as *un sapeur-pompier* (firefighter); **une sapeuse-pomprière** is apparently not pleasing. (Dio 2001:149) Although this variable of harmony is hard to define, it is a real problem for French speakers and it could be a reason for native speakers to reject foreign borrowings or new feminine forms.

These important considerations must be taken into account when creating new feminine forms. It is problematic if a proposed form already has another meaning,

especially if the already-established meaning is derogatory, or if it does not sound pleasing to the ear.

5 Possibilities for Feminization

Since there are already lots of masculine/feminine pairs for profession words and for nouns in general, it is easy to use established prototypes to create some new words. One could take a masculine noun and add a feminine suffix that is already used, as in *un ingénieur/une ingénieure** ‘engineer’ (Ransbo 1992:96). However, keep in mind what I stated in section 4: sometimes there is already a feminine form, but for some reason it cannot be used to designate females of the profession. In that case, one must settle for another solution.

For professions that always take the masculine article as well as the masculine noun, one could begin to use the feminine article when referring to women; for example, **une proviseur* ‘principal.’ (I have marked this as unacceptable since I was just using it as an example of a word that, according to Ransbo (1992:98), currently must be used with the masculine article.) One could instead take a more radical approach and create an entirely new word in order to avoid using a derogatory term, but this would likely create confusion and would not catch on quickly.

Another possibility is adding the word *femme* before or after the masculine word to make it clear that the word refers to a woman. Ransbo (1992:98-9) presents a group of words ending in *-(s)seur*, derived from the Latin *-(s)sor*, which name prestigious professions. Here there is no feminine counterpart, but the masculine can be used for female subjects only in certain grammatical positions (attribute and title) when it

designates the profession, not the person with that profession. To denote a woman of these professions in the subject or object position, one absolutely must add the word *femme*, for example *une assesseur femme* ‘associate.’ *Femme* can also be added to other profession words if there is no available feminine form, as in *une femme chauffeur* ‘female driver.’

Which of these techniques are used, and which one is the most popular? These are the primary questions driving my research.

6 Arguments Concerning Feminization

The controversy over feminization is mainly a social issue. Curiously, there seems to be a high number of feminists arguing both for and against the feminization of masculine forms. Although they all think the current system is sexist, they address this problem in opposite ways. Some of them believe that women deserve their own forms for profession words and forcing them to use a masculine designation implies that they are not good enough for their own. Others believe that singling out gender is sexist and having only one form is more equal.

A popular argument for feminization is that women now work in fields previously open only to men, particularly prestigious positions that often have masculine titles. Many people think that grammar should catch up with society; while the professional world itself is becoming more accepting, they believe the words used to denote professionals are still androcentric and therefore sexist. Giving women their own separate forms will supposedly empower them rather than force them to fit into a masculine mold.

The main argument against feminization is that not everyone thinks the current profession words are sexist. On the contrary, many people, especially women, feel that using a separate feminine word devalues their profession and is derogatory rather than empowering. This is the case not only for new feminized forms but even for some already accepted feminine forms. Making the effort to create new separate feminine forms puts too much emphasis on gender and is actually divisive. If a man and woman hold the same job, why are two different words necessary?

Some of the people who believe that French is sexist in general point out that changing feminine titles is a way to begin addressing the underlying sexism of the French language (Moscovici 1997). It is probably easier to initiate change when the referent has real-world gender that can be associated with grammatical gender, rather than starting out with something vague such as trying to change the gender used for gender-neutral nominals. If feminine forms become widely established and most speakers begin using them, those speakers might be more open to further gender-related changes in the language.

Finally, a more rare opinion is that of Adèle Mercier (2002), who believes that feminizing profession words does not address the underlying problem of androcentrism and a much more broad solution is necessary. Simply changing words that denote professions will not change the fact that women are marginalized in other aspects of the language and will not motivate people to seek further change. See the section on “other ideas that address perceived sexism in French” for some of her more far-reaching proposals. Noelle Brick and Clarissa Wilks (1994) similarly argue that a linguistic and

terminological movement will do little if there is no effort made to change people's attitudes towards professional women.

Since this is such a social issue it is difficult to find linguistic arguments, but Klaus Vogel (1997) provides a convincing one. Linguistically, there is a disconnect between grammar and semantics; using grammatically masculine forms for words whose sense or reference is inherently feminine seems strange. Vogel writes that perhaps it is natural language evolution to merge grammar and semantics and use forms that are grammatically feminine whenever the real-world gender of the referent is female. This idea is supported by the fact that many people have started to use feminine forms although there is still not one socially accepted set of rules governing them; people are taking the initiative on their own, and this might be because it makes more sense to them when the real-world gender and the grammatical gender are the same.

7 The Role of Political Correctness

In France, the notion of political correctness is less politically charged than in English-speaking countries such as the United States and the United Kingdom. It is usually used during cultural or sociological dialogue about topics such as gender roles. Michael Toolan (2003) found 69 articles in the French newspaper *Le Monde* that used the term *politiquement correct* 'politically correct' and calculated word frequencies in this corpus compared to a frequency list for French. *Femme* and *femmes* are among the terms that are disproportionately frequent in this *politiquement correct* setting, suggesting that the French people do apply some notion of political correctness to gender.

The idea of political correctness does not seem to be a big part of the feminization debate explicitly; Moscovici (1997) brushes past the issue in writing that changing the treatment of gender in French is not just political correctness, but a necessary step to a world that is more sociolinguistically fair and understanding. But Toolan's findings, along with the fact that profession words (either masculine or feminine) have an incredible power to offend, suggest that political correctness does play some role. Sometimes people use parentheses to avoid choosing between the masculine and feminine forms of a word, as in *une médecin(e)* 'doctor,' which shows that they are at least thinking of the social consequences of their word choice. In the preface to Femme, j'écris ton nom (Becquer 1999:6), Lionel Jospin brings up the idea of parity, which is already important in politics, writing that feminization is a way to make language equal. The desire to be politically correct, or at least to be conscious of the impact words have on the people they refer to, seems to be one of the reasons for the lack of standardization of forms.

8 Official Opinions and Investigations

Feminization has been on the minds of French people for decades; style guides such as Le guide du bon usage 'The guide to good use' have included sections on feminization for at least 50 years (Becquer 1999:17), and French dictionaries often include feminine forms of some professions, even those that do not have one clear, widely accepted feminine form. But standardizing forms would mean turning to a language authority.

The French government has a history of prescriptive grammar and, in fact, has a special board that discusses language issues. This Académie Française is the official language authority, and it puts out recommendations about language use. The official position of the Académie is that the masculine gender is unmarked and can therefore represent both genders; to achieve equality, profession words should remain masculine unless there is a well-accepted feminine form (Larivière 2001:15).

France is considered to be behind its fellow French-speaking countries in the use and encouragement of feminine forms. Pogacnik (1999:145) writes that Switzerland, Quebec and Belgium have been ahead of France in feminization efforts for years. Authorities in these countries have been proactive in advocating feminization. The Canadian language authority, Office de la langue française du Québec, published an official guide of feminized forms of job titles in 1991 (Mercier 2002:508).

Several commissions have been designed to further investigate feminization and propose specific usage guidelines within France. Yvette Roudy, then-Minister of women's rights (similar to a Cabinet position), began a feminization movement and in 1984 put together a commission to examine possibilities for feminization. This so-called Commission Roudy proposed the use of the feminine article and feminine suffix –e added to existing masculine forms (Brick 1994:235). The Commission de féminisation des noms de métier (1986) also tried to impose a system of feminization. Obviously, these commissions have not had incredible success since over 20 years later there is still considerable variation in the forms people use.

Le Grand Robert de la langue française (a style guide put out by a major reference book publisher) foresees an increase in feminine forms and suggests over 200

new ones using current feminine suffixes (Ransbo 1992:96). Dictionary writers, who are often linguists trained to recognize patterns of language but not advocate prescriptive grammar, generally only include words in a dictionary that are in common use. This means that they have noticed that people are using feminized forms, and perhaps the French language is naturally evolving to include more of them.

9 Other Ideas that Address Perceived Sexism in French

In response to the notion that French is a sexist language in general, several proposals have been put forth. One is to change the negative connotations of feminine words so they can be used for non-offensive things, including professions. This is linguistically easy, since it does not involve creating any new words, but socially a challenge since people already have these connotations engrained in their minds. This solution would take a long time to catch on, since it would require people to use inappropriate and derogatory terms for jobs that are completely normal and socially acceptable.

Adèle Mercier (2002), a fervent supporter of changing what she sees as the inherent sexism in French, has proposed several ideas, some of them radical. First of all, when referring to a group of people of the same profession, instead of using just the masculine form one might use both forms, as in *serveurs et serveuses* ‘waiters and waitresses.’ This might seem familiar to English speakers since we sometimes do it too, for example in the common phrase “ladies and gentlemen.” This solution can be rather unwieldy, though, especially when adjectives are added and one must combine two

lengthy phrases, as in *les bons serveurs et les bonnes serveuses* ‘the good waiters and waitresses.’

Another of Mercier’s ideas is a so-called “alternation rule.” If a sentence has parallel form, one might alternate between feminine and masculine forms of nouns and their associated determiners and adjectives. For example:

Nous devons donner à chacune ce qu’elle mérite et la
We must give to each-fem what SUBJ-fem deserves and OBJ-fem

féliciter quand elle est méritante; mais nous devons également traiter
congratulate when SUBJ-fem is deserving; but we must also treat .

chacun avec justice et le punir quand il le mérite.
each-masc with justice and OBJ-masc punish when SUBJ-masc it deserves

(‘We must give to each what she deserves and congratulate her when she is deserving; but we must also treat each with justice and punish him when he deserves it.’) (Mercier 2002:514) In this sentence the first half includes two feminine subjects, a feminine object, and the feminine *chacune*, ‘each.’ In contrast, the second half includes a masculine subject, a masculine object, and the masculine *chacun*. This was inspired by English; Mercier points out that in English we sometimes use this kind of alternation, but we also have the easier (if not widely accepted) option of using a gender-neutral, singular “they,” which is impossible in French.

Mercier’s most radical proposal, in my opinion, is the “positive discrimination rule” by which one would use the feminine instead of the masculine in gender-neutral settings. For example:

Toute médecine respectueuse de ses patients les avertit
Every-fem doctor-fem respectful-fem of POSS-masc/fem patients them warns

quand elle doit s’absenter.
when she must be absent-reflexive

(‘Every doctor who is respectful of her patients warns them when she must be absent.’)
 (Mercier 2002:514) This is the only example Mercier gives, and I have changed it since I am not quite sure that her version is a good example of a completely feminine sentence. She uses the nominal form *médecin* ‘doctor,’ probably because there is no widely accepted feminine form, and thus masculine forms of *tout* ‘every’ and *respectueux* ‘respectful.’ I have made these forms feminine since that is the intent of her rule. My example stands in stark contrast to current usage, where this sentence would incorporate the masculine in its so-called gender-neutral use and would not include any feminine elements. At any rate, this rule does not address the problem at all because it is still sexist; reversing the order of the sexism towards men rather than towards women is not fair, and the term “positive discrimination” itself is nonsensical, since the very nature of discrimination is negative.

Finally, Mercier also proposes a “courtesy rule,” whereby in gender-neutral situations, male speakers always use the feminine and female speakers always use the masculine. The articles and adjectives would agree with the real-world gender of the referent. For example, women would say:

Tout médecin respectueux est attentif à avertir ses patients en cas de retard.
 Every doctor respectful-masc is attentive-masc at warning POSS-masc/fem patients in case of lateness

(‘Every respectful doctor is attentive in warning his patients in the case of lateness.’)

while men would say:

Toute médecine respectueuse est attentive à avertir ses patients en cas de retard.
 Every doctor respectful-fem is attentive-fem at warning POSS-masc/fem in case of lateness

cas de retard.
case of lateness

(‘Every respectful doctor is attentive in warning her patients in the case of lateness.’)
(Mercier 2002:514) Mercier only provided the first example, so hopefully I applied the rule correctly to the second sentence. Notice that women would use the masculine form of *tout* ‘every,’ *respectueux* ‘respectful’ and *attentive* ‘attentive,’ while men would use the feminine forms *toute*, *respectueuse* and *attentive*. This solution is the most confusing because it requires using both masculine and feminine forms rather than deciding on one or the other, and it might lead to ambiguities if someone actually means to single out males or females. However, I also find it to be the most promising solution that Mercier proposes because it brings in the ideas of mutual respect and politeness. The most difficult problem with feminization is that different people find different things offensive, and the goal of this rule is to remove the offensive notion of arbitrarily assigning one gender that is correct for gender-neutral situations.

10 Research Methods

The goal of my research was to get a general picture of the forms of profession words that fluent French speakers currently use and the different ways they form masculine and feminine words, particularly those that do not conform to a widely accepted rule. I also hoped to shed some light on the subject of agreement between articles, nouns and adjectives when the gender of the noun did not match the gender of the real-world referent. I compiled a list of professional nouns that were of particular interest and then distributed a survey to fluent French speakers, both native and non-native, giving them either the masculine or feminine form of each word or sentence and

asking them to produce the other. The results from the native French speakers will be influenced by French culture and society, while the results from non-native speakers will be interesting in another way: they will show what is explicitly taught in language classes. If the two groups produce similar forms, it will suggest that the popular trend is widespread enough to be taught even in other countries.

The first part of my survey consisted of demographic and personal information. I asked participants for their age and sex, how long they have spoken French, whether they consider themselves native French speakers, where the majority of their knowledge of French comes from (acquisition in a native atmosphere or explicit teaching), and the country in which they have lived for the longest period of time. I wanted to determine if there were trends in the participants' answers that corresponded with any of these variables.

The second part of my survey consisted of lexical questions. First I gave 12 nouns in the masculine and asked for the feminine equivalent. I chose nouns that are traditionally the same in the masculine and the feminine or that have multiple possible feminine forms; I made sure to include nouns whose suggested feminine equivalents were formed by different grammatical rules:

un auteur 'author'
un chauffeur 'driver'
un chef 'boss/chef'
un clerc 'cleric/scholar'
un demandeur 'applicant'
un docteur 'doctor'
un enquêteur 'researcher'
un génie 'genius/mastermind'
un inventeur 'inventor'
un professeur 'teacher/professor'
un sapeur-pompier 'firefighter'
un sculpteur 'sculptor'

Then I gave six nouns in the feminine and asked for the masculine equivalent; I chose nouns that traditionally have only a feminine form. The list of nouns that are always feminine was much smaller than the list of nouns that are always masculine, so I chose a few, even though some of them were outdated terms so I was not able to draw as much from the responses:

une bonne ‘maid’
une bonne d’enfants ‘nanny’
une chambrière ‘room cleaner’
une estafette ‘courier’
une recrue ‘recruit’
une sagefemme ‘midwife’

Next I asked participants to translate short sentences that contained profession words. I included five sentences in the masculine that participants were to transform into the feminine:

Monsieur le Ministre est beau. ‘Mr. Minister is handsome.’
Il est le meilleur professeur. ‘He is the best teacher/professor.’
Le médecin le plus estimé est lui. ‘The most respected doctor is he.’
Un auteur doit être précis. ‘An author must be precise.’
Monsieur le Duc est charmant. ‘Mr. Duke is charming.’

I also included three sentences that participants were to change from feminine to masculine:

Elle est ma star préférée. ‘She is my favorite star.’
Une bonne sentinelle est vigilante. ‘A good sentinel is vigilant.’
Elle est une bonne sentinelle. ‘She is a good sentinel.’

The sentences were designed to determine whether speakers change the gender of an adjective to match the real-world gender of the referent even when they may keep the noun in a gender that does not match the real-world gender of the referent.

To view the survey as given out to participants, see the appendix.

I recognize that given the very small sample size, the results of my survey are not representative of French speakers in general or French speakers in any given country. Since all of the participants are either people I already knew or people only a few degrees removed from me, the results are also biased towards certain social networks. Further studies should include many more survey participants, perhaps focusing on comparing different groups such as male versus female or different countries of origin.

All that being said, my research does provide a glimpse into the variation in the use of feminine forms. The dissimilarities among the responses of my 21 participants speak to the ongoing uncertainty about correct forms. A lot has already been written about this topic, but the fact that there is so much variation among speakers and that we cannot predict a speaker's preference based on social factors shows how much more there is to look into. Hopefully my thesis will spark interest and provoke continuing study of this interesting phenomenon.

11 Results

Twenty-one French speakers filled out my survey. They range in age from 19 to 60 years old (with an average of 38.7) and include 17 women and four men. Fifteen of them consider themselves native speakers while six do not. Fourteen of them report that most of their knowledge of the French language comes from native acquisition; five report a combination of native acquisition and explicit teaching; and only one reports knowledge based mostly on explicit teaching. Ten have lived primarily in the United States, six primarily in France; one has lived primarily in Germany, one in Belgium; two

spent equal time in France and the United States; and one spent equal time in the United States and the French Antilles.

In section 11.1, I give my results by word or sentence and analyze the overall trends I find. I have grouped the words that were changed into the feminine according to the rule for feminization that they are supposed to follow according to Femme, j'écris ton nom. The numbers might not all add up to the total of 21 participants because some participants left things blank or provided more than one answer for the same question. All percentages are calculated based on the number of responses for the individual word and are rounded to the nearest decimal point for simplicity.

In section 11.2, I categorize the participants based on sex, age, country of origin, and French knowledge (native versus non-native). I compare the results for females versus males; participants under 40 years old versus those 40 and over; participants who have spent more time in the United States versus in France, with a brief look at some other native countries; and native speakers who acquired French naturally versus non-native speakers who were explicitly taught. These numbers might not add up to 21 because some participants could not be placed in the categories I chose; more details will be given in the relevant explanation later in this section.

11.1 Overall Results

Individual Words

Both *chef* 'chef' and *clerc* 'clerk' are in a special category of words that are considered difficult to feminize; thus an unchanged masculine form preceded by the feminine article *une* is expected. *Cheffe* is also used in Switzerland; the form

chefesse/cheffesse has been noted in the past but is pejorative. In my survey 15 people (62.5%) gave the expected form *une chef*; 6 (25%) gave *un chef* or reported that no feminine form exists; 2 (8.3%) gave *une cheffe*; and 1 (4.2%) gave *une femme chef*. Feminine forms of *clerc* are used in other countries: Belgium has a *clerc/clerque* option and Switzerland advises *clergesse*. Of my participants, 12 (54.5%) provided *un clerc*, said there was no feminine form, or left it blank; 8 (36.3%) gave the expected form *une clerc*; 1 (4.5%) wrote *une femme clerc*; and 1 (4.5%) gave another word altogether: *une employée* ‘employee.’ Combining the results of these two words, 50% of people gave the expected response, 60.9% changed the article to the feminine form, and 10.9% feminized the form of the noun in some way or added *femme*. The low level of feminization of the noun form goes along with the rule (but does not necessarily mean that people are consciously following the rule).

When the masculine ends in –eur but not –teur, and the noun corresponds to a semantically related verb, the advised feminine form is –euse. The words *chauffeur* and *demandeur* both fall into this category, so if speakers are following this rule we expect *une chauffeuse* and *une demandeuse*. 11 participants (52.4%) used the form *un chauffeur* or said there was no feminine form; 4 (19%) provided *une femme chauffeur*; 3 (14.3%) provided *une chauffeur*; only 2 (9.5%) gave the expected *une chauffeuse*; and 1 (4.8%) gave a different feminized ending, *une chauffeure*. On the other hand, 16 participants (76.2%) used *une demandeuse*; 3 (14.3%) used the masculine form *un demandeur*; 1 (4.8%) used *une demandeur*; and 1 (4.8%) used *une demandeure*. 66.7% of participants for the two words combined provided the feminine article. A majority of people (64.3%) feminized these nouns, but many did not use the same ending; only 42.3% followed the

rule, and only 2 participants followed the rule for *chauffeuse*. Perhaps the reason more people provided the expected form for *demandeur* than *chauffeur* is that *une chauffeuse* has another meaning, ‘heater.’

When the masculine ends in –eur but not –teur and the noun does not correspond semantically to a verb, the feminine form is –eure. *Professeur* falls in this category, so according to the rule, we could expect either *une professeur* or *une professeure*. However, this noun is used as a prime example of a word that is difficult to feminize and it seems that no one can agree on what form it should take. Participants were indeed divided. 11 (42.3%) wrote *une professeur*; 6 (23.1%) wrote *une professeure*; 4 (15.4%) wrote *un professeur* or said that there was no feminine form; 3 (11.5%) mentioned that it would be better to use the abbreviated *une prof*; and 2 (7.7%) provided *une femme professeur*. 84.6% of participants used the feminine article but only 30.8% feminized the noun form. My data support the idea that *professeur* has many possibilities and no general trend, although most people did at least use the feminine article.

Inventeur ends in –teur and has a corresponding nominal in –tion (invention, ‘invention’) so according to rule we expect the ending –trice, or *une inventrice*. The form *une inventeuse* is recommended in Switzerland. *Sculpteur* falls into the same category, but it also has the possible form –teur(e), so we can expect one of *une sculptrice*, *une sculpteur*, or *une sculpteuse*. Of my participants, 7 (33.3%) wrote *une inventrice*; 6 (28.6%) wrote *un inventeur* or that there was no feminine form; 3 (14.3%) wrote *une inventeuse*; 2 (9.5%) provided each of the forms *une inventeure* and *une femme inventeur*; and 1 (4.8%) provided *une inventeur*. On the other hand, 8 (38%) provided *une sculpteuse*; 7 (33.3%) wrote *une sculpteuse*; 4 (19%) provided the masculine *un*

sculpteur; and 2 (9.5%) provided *une femme sculpteur*. The noun *sculpteur* was more commonly feminized than *inventeur*, but both were frequently feminized. Overall, 73.8% of participants feminized these noun forms, and 76.2% used the feminine article. The expected forms appeared 52.4% of the time.

Docteur and *auteur* both end in –teur and do not have a corresponding verb, so we would normally expect the ending –trice in this case as well. However, they are both mentioned in a special note because for these particular words the ending –trice has become unacceptable. The expected forms are either unchanged or with an –e: *une auteur/une auture, une docteur/une docteure*. 12 people (48%) wrote *une auteure*; 7 (28%) wrote *une auteur*; 4 (16%) wrote *un auteur* or that there was no feminine form; and 2 (8%) wrote *une femme auteur*. On the other hand, 7 people (33.3%) wrote *un docteur* or that there was no feminine form; 6 (28.6%) wrote *une docteur*; 5 (23.8%) wrote *une docteure*; and 3 (14.3%) wrote *une femme docteur* or *une femme médecin*. Overall, 76.1% of participants used the feminine article, 47.8% feminized the form of the noun, and 65.2% followed the expected rule. So the feminized forms are fairly frequently used for these words.

Enquêteur also ends in –teur, but it lacks a corresponding nominal in –tion, -ture or –torat, so we expect the ending- teuse: *une enquêteuse*. I received 10 responses (45.4%) of *une enquêtrice*; 7 (31.8%) of *une enquêteuse*; 3 (13.6%) of *un enquêteur* or no feminine form; and 2 (9.1%) of *une enquêteure*. People do tend to feminize this noun form (86.4% of participants used the feminine article and a feminine form of the noun), but they do not always use the expected ending. The most popular ending was –trice, which is a possible ending for –teur words of a different category. This suggests that

speakers do not separate profession words into as many morphological categories as grammarians do.

According to the rule about complex forms, *sapeur-pompier* should change to something like *une sapeuse-pompière*; however, as mentioned earlier in this paper, this form has not caught on. My data support this: 10 participants (50%) used *une sapeur-pompier*; 8 (40%) wrote *un sapeur-pompier* or said there was no feminine form; and 2 (10%) provided *une femme sapeur-pompier*. No one actually used the feminized form *une sapeuse-pompière*; only two participants feminized the noun, and that was only by adding the word *femme*. However, 60% did use the feminine form of the article.

Overall, participants showed overwhelming variation in the forms provided, although there was a strong trend in favor of feminine articles and a fairly strong tendency to feminize the noun. 72.1% of responses included the feminine form of the article, and 46.7% changed the form of the noun. The overall trend toward feminization could be biased by my instructions to provide a feminine form; however, the fact that so many people changed the article shows that French speakers prefer the article to agree with the gender of the referent, even when the noun does not. The fact that so many people used feminized forms that were not expected by the rules I used can partially be explained by the fact that the rules for –eur and –teur nouns are incredibly confusing; it is unlikely that people actually follow these rules, even if they know them. The variation is also caused by individual and social factors; see section 12 for further discussion.

I received much more variation when I provided a feminine form and asked for the masculine form. One reason for this is that I did not have as many words to choose from, and the words are not as common as the masculine ones for which participants had

to provide feminine forms. *Bonne* ‘maid,’ *bonne d’enfants* ‘nanny,’ and *chambrière* ‘room cleaner’ are not frequently used and are considered by some to be derogatory. *Estafette* ‘courier’ is an old-fashioned term, and *recrue* ‘recruit’ and *sagefemme* ‘midwife’ both have such specific uses that speakers probably do not use them often. Femme, j’écris ton nom does not recommend any general rules for the masculinization of these nouns, but it provides a recommended masculine form for each feminine form, except for *une estafette* and *une recrue*, which I got from another source (Larivière).

There were nine different responses to the feminine form *une bonne*. The recommended form and also the most common was *un domestique* ‘servant,’ which 9 participants (40.9%) wrote; 2 additional people (9.1%) provided the similar *un servant* ‘servant.’ Five participants (22.7%) wrote *une bonne*, wrote that there was no masculine, or did not provide a response. One participant (4.5%) added the word *homme*, just as one might add *femme* to a masculine form, creating *une bonne homme*. The remaining five people (22.7%) provided similar words or phrases: *un employé de maison* ‘household employee,’ *un homme de service* ‘manservant,’ *un valet* ‘manservant/valet,’ *un ménager* ‘domestic worker,’ and *un homme à tout faire* ‘handyman/jack of all trades.’ Sixteen participants (72.7%) changed the article to the masculine form and 17 (77.3%) changed the noun or added *homme*.

I received 13 distinct responses for the feminine form *une bonne d’enfants*. The most popular response was *une bonne d’enfants*, the statement that there was no masculine, or leaving the question blank (8 participants, 34.8%). Six participants (26.1%) wrote variations of the recommended phrase *un garde d’enfants* ‘children’s guardian.’ Three (13%) provided *un babysitter* ‘babysitter.’ One (4.3%) added *homme*,

writing *une bonne d'enfants homme*. The other 5 participants (21.7%) provided similar terms such as *un au pair* 'au pair' and *un gouvernant* 'caretaker.' Fourteen participants (60.9%) used the masculine form of the article and 15 (65.2%) changed the form of the noun or added *homme*.

There were nine different responses for *une chambrière*. Nine participants (40.9%) provided the unchanged feminine form *une chambrière*, wrote that there was no masculine form or did not respond. Four (18.2%) removed the ending –e, often used to mark the feminine, to obtain *un chambrier*. One (4.5%) combined the masculine article and feminine noun, *un chambrière*; one inserted *homme*: *une chambrière homme*. The remaining seven (31.8%) provided other words similar to the responses for the previous two survey words. None provided the recommended form *un valet de chambre* 'room valet.' Twelve of the responses (54.5%) included the masculine article and twelve also used a masculine form of the noun or added *homme*.

Participants provided eight different responses for *une estafette*. Fourteen (63.6%) wrote *une estafette* or no masculine form or did not respond. Two (9.1%) removed the feminine ending and wrote *un estafet*; one (4.5%) kept the noun form but added the masculine article: *un estafette*. The other 5 participants (22.7%) provided related words such as *un courier* 'courier' and *un messenger* 'messenger.' Fewer than half of the participants (36.3%) used the masculine article, and even fewer (31.8%) provided a masculine form of the noun. Perhaps participants did not find it unusual to use the feminine form here because they were used to military words that happen to be feminine but refer to both men and women. The previous words are almost always used for women, and a majority of participants changed their form.

I received only four different responses for *une recrue*. Fourteen people (63.6%) wrote *une recrue*, no masculine form or no response. Four (18.1%) took off the feminine ending –e and provided *un recru*; three (13.6%) changed the article but not the noun, providing *un recrue*. One participant (4.5%) gave a colloquial term, *un bleu*. 36.3% of participants used the masculine article here, and 22.7% used a masculine form of the noun. As was the case for the previous example, this is a military term, which may explain the lower level of masculinization.

There were eight distinct responses for *une sagefemme*. Since the word contains a blatant feminine form, *femme*, we might expect to see participants change it to its masculine equivalent, *homme*. Once again, the most popular at 6 participants (27.2%) was *une sagefemme*, no masculine form, or no response. Next, 5 people (22.7%) provided the expected form *un sagehomme*. Three (13.6%) provided each of the forms *un sagefemme* and *un homme sagefemme* or *une sagefemme homme*. Two (9.1%) wrote *un accoucheur* ‘obstetrician;’ one (4.5%) wrote each of the following: *un homme sage*, literally ‘wise man;’ *un médecin* ‘doctor;’ and *un maïeuticien*, the recommended form. 68.1% of participants used the masculine article and 59.1% used a masculine form of the noun.

Overall, 54.9% of responses included a masculine article and 51.1% included a masculine form of the noun. It seems that people were more likely to change the article and noun when the word or phrase typically described women. It is a lot more common to have male couriers or recruits, however, and in these two instances fewer people bothered to change the article and the noun to a masculine form.

Far more people changed a masculine article to a feminine article (72.1%) than a feminine article to a masculine article (54.9%). As previously stated, some of the typically-feminine forms have been accepted for a long time as forms for men as well as for women, which could explain why people were not as likely to feel the need to change the article. Participants were slightly more likely to change the gender of the noun from feminine to masculine (51.1%) than from masculine to feminine (46.7%). This difference is not large and could be due to chance, but it might also be explained by the fact that some of the feminine terms are almost always used for women and thus are awkward when used for men, so participants substituted other words.

Sentences

There were only two responses for the sentence I was most interested in, *Monsieur le Ministre est beau*. All participants changed the title *Monsieur* to the feminine form *Madame* and also changed the adjective *beau* to *belle*. 81% of participants wrote *Madame la Ministre est belle*, also changing the article, and 19% of participants wrote *Madame le Ministre est belle*, keeping the masculine article. These results suggest that people do not use the gender of the noun *Ministre* to determine the gender of the adjective; even when they left the masculine article with this unchanging, gender-neutral form, they still used the feminine form of the adjective. They could either be agreeing with the gender of the title *Madame* or with the gender of the real-world referent, which seems more likely. Similar results were obtained for the sentence *Monsieur le Duc est charmant*. All participants used the feminine title *Madame* and the feminine adjective *charmante*; 90.5% of participants also changed *le Duc* to *la Duchesse*.

For the remaining sentences to be turned from masculine to feminine, there was much more variation. For *Il est le meilleur professeur*, 82.6% of participants changed the adjective to the feminine *meilleure* and 43.5% changed the noun to a feminine form. Interestingly, this is higher than the 30.8% who feminized the noun *professeur* when it was presented alone in the word section of the survey. The sentence *Le médecin le plus estimé est lui* garnered similar results. Although only 26.3% of responses contained a feminine form of the noun, 68.4% of responses used the feminine form of the adjective *estimée*. For the sentence *Un auteur doit être précis*, the majority of participants (81.8%) once again used a feminine adjective, *précise*. This time, though, over half of them (63.6%) also provided a feminine noun; this is higher than the 56% who provided a feminine form for *auteur* in the word section of the survey. In all three of these sentences, the fact that the vast majority of people wrote a feminine adjective, even if they left the noun form unchanged, shows that they still treat the noun as feminine and they prefer to have the adjective agree with the gender of the real-world referent than with the gender of the noun.

Results were very different for the sentences that were to be turned from feminine to masculine. For all three sentences, fewer than half of the responses included a masculine article and fewer than half included a masculine noun. For the sentence *Elle est ma star préférée*, only two (9.1%) of the responses included a changed form of the noun; one of these was to another feminine noun, *vedette* ‘star,’ and the other suggested using a more specific noun such as *acteur* ‘actor,’ *artiste* ‘artist,’ or *écrivain* ‘writer.’ 36.4% of responses included the masculine adjective *préféré*. For the sentence *Une bonne sentinelle est vigilante*, only 20% of participants provided a masculine form of the

noun (two took off the feminine ending to create *sentinel* while others provided *guetteur* ‘watchman’ and *gardien* ‘guard’) and 45% changed the adjective to *vigilant*. The final sentence, *Elle est une bonne sentinelle*, solicited even fewer masculine forms. 15% of responses used a noun other than *sentinelle* (these included *sentinel* again and *soldat* ‘soldier’), and 25% changed the noun to *bon*.

It is interesting that many more people changed the gender of the adjective when they were turning sentences feminine than when they were turning sentences masculine. They were also more likely to turn the nouns feminine than to turn them masculine, although this difference was not as great. I am not quite certain why this is; it seems that for some reason the essence of gender is more closely tied with the feminine nouns I chose than with the masculine nouns I chose. It could just be an issue of these particular nouns that are hard to find masculine equivalents for, or it could be that the feminine gender is marked and therefore people are less likely to change it to masculine.

11.2 Results by Participant Category

First I separated the male participants (four) from the female participants (17). When turning masculine forms feminine, the men used the feminine article 75% of the time and changed the noun 40% of the time. Women provided similar responses, using the feminine article 74% of the time and a feminine word 46% of the time. When asked to turn feminine words masculine, men changed to the masculine article 50% of the time and changed the noun form 46% of the time. Women used masculine forms slightly more; they changed the article 59% of the time and changed the noun 54% of the time. These results do not show great disparity between the responses of men and women.

Next, I separated the participants into two age groups: under 40 (eight people) and over 40 (12 people). One participant did not provide an age, so there were twenty in total. In general, there were not huge differences between the two subsets. They were almost equally likely to turn a masculine article feminine (72.9% in the younger group, 74.3% in the older group), but the older group was more likely to turn a masculine noun feminine (53.5% compared to 33.3%). When turning feminine nouns masculine, the older speakers changed the article 55.6% of the time and the noun 55.6% of the time, while the younger speakers changed the article slightly more (66.7%) and the noun slightly less (45.8%). Since the older speakers changed both the article and the noun together in every instance of masculinization, perhaps they are more likely to think of the article and noun as a unit and change the two together. However, this could be due to the specific words, since we do not see the same results for feminization.

The next groups I compared were the participants who spent most of their lives in France (six people) and those who spent most of their lives in the United States (ten people). The other five participants spent most of their lives in other countries or in a combination of these two, so their results are discussed separately in the following paragraph. There was a difference between these two groups; those who spent more time in France were more likely to change the gender of the article and noun in the cases of both feminization and masculinization. 96.7% of the France group switched to a feminine article and 61.7% switched to a feminine noun, compared to 75.8% and 43.3% of the United States group, respectively. The results were not quite as disparate for turning forms masculine; 63.3% of the France group used a masculine article and 70% used a masculine noun, while 60% of the United States group used a masculine article

and 58.3% used a masculine noun. These differences are likely cultural and could be attributed to several things. The France group is more likely to have learned French in a native setting and thus would be more influenced by the spoken trends of people around them as opposed to specific learned rules. These speakers are also probably more familiar with women's rights and feminist movements in France, which are tied up in the feminization debate, as well as other sources advocating for or against feminization. The speakers from the United States group, on the other hand, have had less contact with French culture and therefore probably stick with whichever forms they originally learned. The fact that the France group was more likely to turn both masculine forms feminine and feminine forms masculine suggests that they see gender not as an inherent part of the word that cannot change but as variable depending on the gender of the referent.

I will briefly discuss the results of the participants who did not spend the majority of their lives in France or the United States. Two participants spent an equal amount of time in those two countries. When feminizing, they used the feminine article 54.2% of the time and a feminine noun also 54.2% of the time. When masculinizing, the rates for both masculine article and masculine noun were 33.3%. With one exception (that of turning a noun feminine), these rates are lower than those of both the France and United States subsets, a curious fact I cannot explain, but one that is based on only two participants so might not be representative. One participant spent most of her time in Germany. When turning masculine forms feminine, she changed 100% of the articles and only 33.3% of the nouns; when turning feminine forms masculine, she changed 66.7% of the articles and none of the nouns. Another participant, who has spent most of her time in Belgium, turned 100% of articles and 58.3% of nouns feminine and turned

66.7% of articles and 33.3% of nouns masculine. She showed the highest rates of noun feminization of any country other than France (compare at 61.7%), backing up the notion brought up earlier in this paper that Belgium values feminization more than France does. The German and Belgian participants seem to value gender agreement between the article and the referent; they change the gender of the article much more than they change the gender of the noun. Finally, the remaining participant split her time equally between the United States and the French Antilles. She provided feminine forms for none of the articles and nouns, and masculine forms for 83.3% of the articles and 66.7% of the nouns. For her, the difference was not between articles and nouns but between feminine and masculine; for reasons unknown, she was not inclined to feminize any forms, but she did change many of the feminine forms masculine. The differences between these participants as compared to the two larger France and United States groups reaffirms the importance of culture in the choice of gender for articles and nouns. Although these results are based on only a few participants, they are disparate enough to suggest that the country in which one lives affects one's use of feminine and masculine forms in French.

Lastly, I have compared two subsets of participants that are somewhat similar to the France and United States groups. I examined participants' responses about whether or not they consider themselves native speakers and whether they acquired the language naturally or through explicit teaching. Based on this, I divided the participants into two subsets that I will call native (12 people) and non-native (nine people). Although all of the people who were in the previously discussed France group are also in the native group, the non-native and United States groups do not completely overlap, so it is still useful to examine the native versus non-native responses separately. In fact, the native

and non-native subsets have much more similar responses to each other than do the France and United States subsets. When asked to provide feminine forms, the natives used a feminine article 75% of the time and a feminine noun 48.6% of the time, compared to 72.2% and 48.1%, respectively, by the non-natives. When providing masculine forms, the natives changed the article 51.4% of the time and the non-natives changed the article 64.8% of the time; natives changed the noun 52.8% of the time while non-natives changed the noun 51.9% of the time. The numbers are practically identical, with the exception of a small difference when considering articles turned masculine. Non-natives changed the article more than the noun, while the native group had almost equal rates of change for the article and the noun. This looks a lot like what happened in the older versus younger speakers; I speculated that perhaps the older speakers think of the article and noun as a unit and change the two together. It seems that the native speakers of French do the same thing. In the previous paragraph I also concluded that people who spent most of their lives in France consider gender to be separate from a noun and not an inherent property. It appears that native French speakers who have spent most of their lives in France are more likely to make the article and noun agree in gender and are also more willing to change the gender of the noun based on the referent.

I have shown that there do exist differences between social categories of speakers, particularly based on country of origin and native versus non-native speaking status, but none of the discrepancies are so large that they bring us to any major conclusions. It seems that between both sexes and among all age groups and nationalities, feminization is highly variable. Larger-scale studies comparing social groups such as the ones I have begun to examine here would certainly be useful in pursuing the cause of variation.

12 Implications

Though the scope of my research is small, my results do show extreme variation in feminine forms and a lack of prevailing rules, even within small groups of speakers who share the social categories of age, sex, national origin and native speaking status. It seems that even after several commission investigations and published suggestions, French speakers are no closer to accepting general conventions for the formation of feminine profession words.

Why do people not always follow the recommendations? Many people are probably not aware of them, since feminine forms of most nouns are acquired when other vocabulary is acquired and not everyone looks up the problematic ones to see what is suggested- or even knows that they are problematic. They probably just get used to the forms used by their family and others around them and consider those forms to be the right ones. Furthermore, different linguists, grammarians and government officials recommend different rules, so even someone trying to speak “correctly” would have problems figuring out which word to use. The individual rules are also confusing; some of them seem to overlap. For example, the distinction between –trice and –teuse is somewhat unclear in Femme, j’écris ton nom. When speaking, it is not efficient to try to remember if the noun has a corresponding verb that has a certain ending; speakers most likely choose whatever they think sounds best or whatever they are used to hearing.

Linguistically, feminization makes sense because it clears up contradictions and reduces the opportunities for ambiguity. Vogel’s argument about uniting semantic gender and grammatical gender is very sensible and practical. That being said, I have already stated that feminization is a social issue; it is a great example of the blurring

between linguistic and social concerns. Something as small as a morphological noun ending sounds like a purely grammatical affair, but it can take on power as a symbol of the problems with gender in the French language and society as a whole.

Some of the discrepancy in the use of feminine forms can be explained by the social status of the profession and how long women have held that profession. Feminization is widely accepted for careers that have been accessible to women for a long time, such as *un coiffeur/une coiffeuse** ‘hairstylist,’ but less common for professions that were until recently dominated by men, such as *un docteur/un docteur* (Evans 1995:42). In fact, many feminine forms for jobs that are not highly valued, as in *un marchand/une marchande** ‘merchant,’ have been the same since the Middle Ages (Becquer 1999:11). Administration and government jobs such as *un huissier* ‘bailiff’ have proven to be particularly resistant to feminization (Leys 1987:40). Sometimes this leads to two different feminine forms, depending on context; for example, *une directrice d’école* ‘school director’ is accepted, but *une directeur* or even *un directeur* is more common for government jobs. Pogacnik (1999:145) suggests that many women retain the masculine form of their profession in order to sound more prestigious. This is probably one of the things holding back the spread of feminization. As long as some people still look down on feminine forms, a certain number of women will resist using them.

It is hard to say to what extent feminization should be pursued and encouraged. Since the tendency to feminize masculine forms is widespread among speakers, language authorities should recognize this fact, as the official commissions have. The Académie Française would not be remiss in adopting a more positive attitude towards feminization.

However, trying to impose a set of standard rules for the creation of feminine forms would likely offend even more people. It assumes that everyone will accept the system, but this is not true, since people on both sides of the debate feel strongly and since the Académie Française has questionable power in the first place (it tried but failed to keep foreign borrowings out of the French language). Furthermore, it would be difficult to decide on a system because the Académie Française does not represent all native speakers, and there is no real venue for native speakers to voice their opinions on this topic unless they are the few people who write opinion articles.

It might also make sense to go further and clear up other ambiguities in the language caused by the use of masculine forms. I am especially intrigued by Mercier's courtesy rule, since it does not propose always using one gender or the other, but adds a sense of politeness and respect, which addresses a big problem one faces when choosing between masculine and feminine forms. However, one must take into account the amount of reorganization and change going on in the language at one time. Changes in profession words are hard enough to standardize, and wider-reaching grammatical modifications would have to be made gradually after the initial changes became widely accepted.

Perhaps the most frustrating conclusion suggested by all this is that there is no right answer. In language, just as in other fields, it seems that there is a tendency to look for one simple solution, but it is often impossible. Standardization of forms would mean finding one form for each profession word that was pleasing to the ear, not derogatory, not attached to another meaning, and acceptable to a wide range of people. It would also entail teaching the forms to everyone, and this would prove laborious for speakers

beyond school age, who would have no real incentive to change the way they currently speak, as well as for foreigners learning French as a non-native language. All of this seems very time-consuming and costly in terms of effort, but perhaps that is what the multitude of debates and commissions are leading towards.

On one hand, standardized feminization would add efficiency and simplify grammar by getting rid of a lot of confusing exceptions. In the long run, it might also take the stigma away from feminine forms because there would not be any other alternatives to argue about. However, it would require a huge amount of effort on the part of language policymakers and would take a long time to catch on, if it ever did. There is no clear solution in sight at this time.

Only time will tell which way the trend in French will go: to create even more separate feminine forms, or to go the opposite direction, simplifying and placing less emphasis on gender. Over time languages can lose features that were formerly important, such as case endings; who is to say that gender in French will always remain a fundamental distinction? Of course the system of gender would take a long time to completely disassemble, but perhaps losing grammatical gender distinctions for articles, adjectives and nouns, especially those denoting professions, would be one of the first steps in such a change.

Appendix

Sondage
Survey

J'écris ma thèse sur la féminisation des noms professionnels et des titres en français. Je m'intéresse à l'emploi des formes féminines par des locuteurs qui parlent français couramment, soit des locuteurs natifs, soit des personnes qui s'étaient exposés à la langue depuis longtemps. J'apprécierais votre participation; le sondage ne doit pas prendre plus de 15 minutes de votre temps. S'il vous plaît, remplissez l'information démographique et répondez à toutes les questions selon votre parole normale. Si vous hésitez entre deux réponses, écrivez les deux. Rendez le sondage à moi avant vendredi le 7 décembre.

I am writing my thesis on the feminization of professional nouns and titles in French. I am interested in the current use of feminine forms among fluent French speakers, both native speakers and those who have been exposed to French for a long period of time. I would appreciate your participation; this survey should take no more than 15 minutes of your time. Please fill out the demographic information and answer all the questions according to your normal speech. If you hesitate between two responses, write both. Turn in the survey to me by Friday, December 7.

Merci beaucoup!

Skye Rhodes-Robinson, Bryn Mawr College 2008

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Vous pouvez rendre le sondage à moi, à ma boîte de poste (C-1059), à ma chambre (Merion 205), ou électroniquement à srhodes@brynmawr.edu.

You can return this survey to me, to my post office box (C-1059), to my room (Merion 205), or electronically to srhodes@brynmawr.edu.

Information démographique
Demographic information

Age/Age _____

Sexe/Sex _____

Depuis quand parlez-vous français? _____
How long have you spoken French?

Est-ce que vous vous considérez comme un locuteur natif? Oui Non
Do you consider yourself a native speaker? Yes No

D'où vient la plupart de votre connaissance de la langue française?
Where does the majority of your knowledge of the French language come from?

Acquisition dans un atmosphère natif
Acquisition in a native atmosphere

Enseignement explicite
Explicit teaching

Le pays dans lequel vous habitez pendant la plus longue période:
The country in which you have lived for the longest period of time:

La France
France

Les Etats-Unis
United States

Autre pays francophone: _____
Other francophone country

Autre pays non-francophone: _____
Other non-francophone country

Egalement dans plus d'un pays: _____
Equal time in more than one country

Questions lexicales
Lexical questions

Donnez l'équivalent féminin de ces noms (avec article):
Give the feminine equivalent of these nouns (with article):

- un auteur _____
- un chauffeur _____
- un chef _____
- un clerc _____
- un demandeur _____
- un docteur _____
- un enquêteur _____
- un génie _____
- un inventeur _____
- un professeur _____
- un sapeur-pompier _____
- un sculpteur _____

Donnez l'équivalent masculin de ces noms (avec article):
Give the masculine equivalent of these nouns (with article):

- une bonne _____
- une bonne d'enfants _____
- une chambrière _____
- une estafette _____
- une recrue _____
- une sagefemme _____

Donnez l'équivalent féminin de ces phrases:
Give the feminine equivalent of these sentences:

Monsieur le Ministre est beau.

Il est le meilleur professeur.

Le médecin le plus estimé est lui.

Un auteur doit être précis.

Monsieur le Duc est charmant.

Donnez l'équivalent masculin de ces phrases:
Give the masculine equivalent of these sentences:

Elle est ma star préférée.

Une bonne sentinelle est vigilante.

Elle est une bonne sentinelle.

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