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Language Ideologies and Language Criticism in French

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Abstract. In France, the term *language ideology* generally has a negative connotation. One of the most prominent language ideological debates, which has also received an analogous level of public attention, surrounds the issue of the language standard. Within this debate, it is not rare for other languages and other variants of the French language (often collectively described quite non-specifically with the term *patois*) to be disparaged. Along with this emphasis on the language standard, language ideological discussions and discourses address aspects anchored in the *imaginaire* of many speakers, including the notion of the unique clarity of the French language. However, in the spirit of language purism, language ideological discussions, in which the *Académie française* continues to be involved to a certain extent, also include the rejection of borrowed words, particularly Anglicisms. Presently, the issue of *écriture inclusive* ('inclusive written language') is also being debated in terms of language ideology. Arguments citing potential confusion, illegibility, or possible difficulties in pronunciation play a major role in the assessment or rejection of inclusive writing. Within numerous language ideological debates, demands are being voiced for an authoritative decision on the part of the *Académie française*.

Keywords

language purism, *bon usage*, multilingualism, abuse of language (*abus de mots*), *imaginaire français*, clarity, Anglicisms, foreign word purism, inclusive writing, national language

General

In the field of language ideology research, the central focus is on the perception of language(s) and the relationship between language, ideas and reality/things – not primarily at the individual level, however, but within the framework of a language community and the inherent social, socio-historical and socio-political implications (see the foundational article in this volume). Through their categorisation of social differences and

standards, language ideologies make these visible, but may, at the same time, reinforce or distort them. Within language ideologies, the interests of specific groups emerge, which may also be embedded in national, nation-state or regional interests. These are particularly found in discourses surrounding authority (state, institutional, etc.) (cf. Boudreau 2021: 172).

In France, debates around ideological questions and disputes are unquestionably rooted in philosophy, but their role in French sociology (Pierre Bourdieu) and French discourse analysis (Michel Foucault, Michel Pêcheux) should not be underestimated (cf. Boudreau 2021: 171; Costa 2017: 113).

L'Idéologie s'engendre dans cette espèce de stratégie fondamentale par laquelle chaque sujet social s'efforce non seulement de donner une bonne image de lui-même, mais d'imposer comme universel le principe de classement suivant lequel il est le mieux classé. (Bourdieu 2015: 140)

Use of the term *idéologie*, also in relation to linguistics is widespread in France. It is not rare, however, for *ideology* to be used synonymously with *idea*, *concept* or *viewpoint*, and primarily be found in the context of the dominant view widely circulated throughout the general public. If language ideology is regarded as the knowledge and assessment of how language is used, especially if there is "emphasis on the falsifiable elements of such assessments" (Kremnitz 1990: 55; translation by C.D.)¹, a close relationship to concepts such as language awareness can be observed (cf. Nowakowski 1988: 215; see also the relationship between language awareness and language ideology in the foundational article in this volume). Moreover, language ideologies also include ideas that are not underpinned by scientific argument and are more likely to have their roots in a particular belief, conviction or specific concept (cf. Jaffe 2008: 517f.). This type of ideology is particularly prevalent in public, non-scientific discourses. Nowakowski expands the definition of language ideology to include the reflective aspect of action and describes it as "a speaker's reaction to a specific language awareness" (Nowakowski 1988: 216; translation by C.D.)².

1 Kremnitz (1990: 55): [unter] "Betonung der falsifizierbaren Anteile solcher Bewertungen".

2 Nowakowski (1988: 216): [als] "Reaktion eines Sprechers auf ein bestimmtes Sprachbewußtsein".

In her comparative analysis of metalinguistic discourses in Germany and France, Neusius describes the topoi of “historically legitimised language ideological argumentation” (Neusius 2021: 224; translation by C.D.)³. In this context, she refers, *inter alia*, to the *past topos* (reference to significant actors in the history of the French language), the *superiority topos* (denigration of other languages in comparison to French), the *authority topos* (the educated elite with their standard), the *crisis topos* and the *language decay topos* (cf. Neusius 2021: 224–225, 252, 255, 300, 368, 372).

In current discourse analysis and discourse linguistics research, studies are being conducted to compare prevailing ideological statements and how ‘laypeople’ perceive these (e.g. Meyer/Longhi 2017). In individual linguistic disciplines or areas such as language policy (in France, also conceptualised as *glottopolitique*, in the context of multilingualism – cf. Guespin/Marcellesi 1986; Blanchet 2013), linguistic anthropology or sociolinguistics (in France, represented most notably by Henri Boyer), much time and space are devoted to the analysis of discussions surrounding language ideology.

In present-day use of the term in France, it often bears a negative connotation and is associated with specific public debates (cf. Meyer/Longhi 2017). The language ideological debates surrounding the language standard are thus met with quite a large degree of public attention. This has led, over a long period of time, to the systematic denigration of the use of various other linguistic variants and languages (e.g. *patois*, Occitan or Catalan and even oral or popular language use).

Costa (2017) and Boudreau (2021) have recently summarised the conceptualisation of language ideology and the primary orientation of language ideologies in the French-speaking world. For Costa, the common feature in the definitions of language ideology is their insistence on the question of the connection “entre structure linguistique et structure sociale, entre les mots et les choses, entre l’action et le discours sur l’action” (Costa 2017: 118).

Sarfati (2011: 157) differentiates between *ideology* (*idéologie*) and *ideologisation* (*idéologisation*), wherein the latter occurs at the moment a discourse is given an ideological status. Within this definition, the distinction

3 Neusius (2021: 224): [Topoi einer] “historisch legitimierten sprachideologischen Argumentation”.

between ideological and non-ideological discourse is decisive. The criteria for this differentiation include *inter alia* the predetermined universality (*universalité*) or even the illusion of a temporal detachment of the discourse (*atemporalité*) (cf. Meyer/Longhi 2017). According to Neusius (2021: 215, 341, 462), ideological metalinguistic discourses are not language-specific and undeniably share common content and linguistic patterns.

Since 2015, Wim Remysen and Sabine Schwarze have published a journal on language ideologies specifically for the Romance-language area: *Circula – Revue d'idéologies linguistiques* (Les Éditions de l'Université de Sherbrooke; cf. Remysen/Schwarze/Ennis 2015a; Remysen/Schwarze/Ennis 2015b; Remysen/Schwarze 2019).

Historical

In France, the discussion of ideology in the context of language has a long tradition. A clear differentiation must be made here, however, between various usages. Since the 17th century, a virtually anthropological view of public language use in France (along with its social implications) has been documented (cf. Siouffi 2009: 122).

The group known as the *Idéologues*, which had its origins in the salon of Madame de Helvétius and has been an established group since the end of the 18th century, primarily debated its notions of *idéologie* as a linguistic-philosophical issue and should therefore be excluded from present-day discussions on language ideology (cf. Haßler/Neis 2009: 292, 421).

The question of the degree to which language and, more concretely, words, are responsible for the development and dissemination of political and social ideas (cf. Ricken 1982: 29) became an increasingly prominent theme in 18th-century French discourse. The abuse of the language (*abus des mots*) became a central point of scrutiny here. Inspired by Locke's deliberations on the abuse of language and his condemnation thereof, it was primarily Helvétius (1715–1771), but also Condillac (1714–1780), Rousseau (1712–1778), Diderot (1713–1784), d'Alembert (1717–1783) and Voltaire (1694–1778) who undertook an examination of this topic (cf. Haßler/Neis 2009: 63, 1012). In this debate on the abuse of words and the legitimacy of the meaning of words (*abus* or *justesse des mots*), the connection between language ideology, language criticism and societal

criticism became increasingly evident. At the time of the French Enlightenment, this perspective was used in wide-ranging philosophical and political debates to question the degree to which a word like *seigneur* ('lord'), to name just one example, or later, during the French Revolution, *liberté* ('freedom') might be employed to deceive or repress the people (cf. Ricken 1982: 32; Busse 1995: 237).

Within the framework of the French Revolution, an additional language debate would become virulent: the notion of a uniform national language (French as the *langue nationale*). The survey (*enquête*) was conducted throughout all of France by Abbé Grégoire to determine the degree of dissemination and knowledge of the French language and *patois*. He summarised the results in his report of 4 June 1794 (*Rapport sur la nécessité et les moyens d'anéantir les patois et d'universaliser la langue française*), in which he called for the unification and revolutionisation of the French language. His linguistic-political ideas were thereby incorporated into the overall concept of *uniformité* ('uniformity') in the French Revolution, as part of the evolution of the revolutionary mentality (cf. Schlieben-Lange 1988: 565; Balibar/Laporte 1974).

As the terms *language* and *nation* began to be viewed as equivalent and emphasis was placed on the knowledge of the French language within the nation, other languages and language variants, which had survived over long periods of time in France, began to be regarded as inferior (cf. Kremnitz 1990: 51f.) The valorisation of multilingualism in public discourse only emerged later, towards the end of the second half of the 20th century. The improved perception of the Corsican language over the past several decades is one example of where this can be seen (cf. Jaffe 2008: 519). Despite this, the equivalency of *language* and *nation* continues to remain dominant in the public discourse.

Present

Debates on language ideology in France are primarily centred around ideological and socio-cultural aspects of language use and discourse that are anchored in the *imaginaire français*, i.e. the image the French hold of their culture and society, and hold a high symbolic value (cf. Siouffi 2019: 17). One element of the *imaginaire* is also the notion of

the clarity of the French language, as advanced in the 17th century by François Malherbe (1555–1628), whose concept was not at all rhetorical but fraught with language ideology (cf. Rey/Duval/Siouffi 2007: 610f.; Brunot 1891: 177; Lodge 1997: 244; Winkelmann 1990: 340). As individual philologies emerged, however, it was the *hommes de lettres* and not the linguists who conducted a vehement defence of the clarity of the French language (cf. Swiggers 2010: 451f.). The *clarté du français* ('clarity of the French language') has been categorised by Harald Weinrich (1961: 540–544) as a myth and by Roland Barthes, in his *Critique et vérité* (1966), as a national myth, thereby underlining the ideological construction and social implications of the recourse to the clarity of the French language (cf. Merlin-Kajman 2003: 12; Große 2010; Neusius 2021).

The Ideology of *bon usage* and the Standard

Blanchet (2013: 97f.) posits that the enforcement of a standard is interpreted ideologically as an assertion of political power. Vaugelas' conceptions of *bon usage* ('good usage') and the differentiation between 'good' vs. 'bad usage' (*mauvais usage*), which had dominated since the 17th century, resulted in *usage* acquiring a public status and no longer being restricted to individual language use (cf. Merlin-Kajman 2003: 145). It has thus become the subject of debates on language ideology, which principally centre around the French standard, its development and classification. Schools are an institutional pillar of support in the dissemination of the standard, as are their teachers, who are primarily oriented towards teaching standard French (Blanchet 2013: 101) and generally devote less attention to the heterogeneity of language in communication.

Language Ideology and Language Purism: Discussions in France Surrounding Anglicisms

Since the second half of the 20th century, a particularly virulent purism-oriented language ideological debate has been waged against the use of numerous Anglicisms. One illustrious example is Etiemble's polemical treatise on *franglais* (1964) (cf. Beinke 1990: 118–134). Several of the

English borrowings Etiemble uses to illustrate the ‘disruptive’ influence of English in French are not (or are no longer) used today. By also including non-Anglicised proper names, product names, brand names and lexemes in his argumentation, Etiemble renders his argument linguistically unpersuasive (cf. Beinke 1990: 122; Bogaards 2008: 109). Etiemble’s treatise can thus be considered an example of polemical and linguistic-ideological foreign word purism (cf. Beinke 1990: 5–28). Since the 1970s, the language purism debate in France has been flanked by official attempts on the part of state terminology commissions to recommend French equivalents or replacements for Anglicisms, some of which were already established (cf. Paveau/Rosier 2008: 44). A number of these recommendations for replacements also sparked public language ideology debates by questioning and caricaturing their success for communication (cf. Beinke 1990: 236f.; Braselmann 1999: 18, 117–125, 127ff.; Schweickard 2005: 178).

On the website of the *Académie française*, in the section *Dire, ne pas dire – Néologismes & anglicismes*, they also, to a certain extent, ideologise the discussion of the relevance and acceptance of individual Anglicisms. An example of this is the rejection of Anglicisms for which French synonyms exist, thus negating the area of linguistic connotation for communication that resides alongside denotation (cf. Beinke 1990: 205). In February 2022, the *Académie française* also published a report (*Rapport de la commission d’étude sur la communication institutionnelle en langue française*) based on an analysis of institutional communication on the internet. The *Académie française* has categorised the changes in written French resulting from the use of Anglicisms as an alarming development (“évolution préoccupante”) and fears that the increasing use of Anglicisms will further divide society (Académie française 2022: 24, 28). Concerns about potential incomprehensibility related to the use of Anglicisms is also addressed in the *rapport* (Académie française 2022: 20, 21, 28), thus making reference to a popular argument that has long been a particular feature of language ideological discourses with regard to foreign words (cf. Gardt 2001: 52). Merlin-Kajman (2003: 261) views the concept of purification and expulsion (*purification-expulsion*) of foreign language elements that ‘contaminate’ the language to be one of the linguistic images that exercises a strong influence on the linguistic *imaginaire*. This partially explains the recurring language ideological debates in France on foreign word purism but does not justify them linguistically. The language purism

perspective is by no means limited to foreign word purism, however, but also targets other linguistic structures and aspects, such as linguistic variants, thus positioning itself, for example, against *français populaire* (cf. Merlin-Kajman 2003: 170).

The Debate Surrounding the “Feminisation” of the French Language and *Écriture Inclusive*

In the French public media, there has been an intense decades-long interest in the “feminisation” of the language (cf. Fagard/Le Tallec 2021 on the problematic use of this term), which has taken form in the feminisation of occupational and functional designations as well as a ‘feminist language criticism’ (cf. Braselmann 1999: 48–51). The often highly polemic discussions surrounding the existence and use of the generic masculine form have attracted particular attention. These centre on the question of to what extent the morphological marking of the grammatical gender as masculine carries over to the biological gender in language use and whether the use of the generic masculine is equally valid for marking both the male and female genders (cf. Houdebine-Gravaud 2002: 15; Schafroth 2003: 101; Elmiger 2008: 39; Ossenkop 2020: 40). Beyond this, there is also an ongoing debate on linguistic feminisation at the textual or discursive level. This discussion is focused on the assessment of individual forms in their pragmatic dimension, as in the use of specific forms of address, such as *Mademoiselle* (cf. Elmiger 2008: 24ff.). In this context, a debate emerged in the 1990s that is particularly ubiquitous today, over the issue of inclusive language and inclusive written language (*langage inclusif, écriture inclusive*). This is predominantly associated with specific adaptations at the graphic level (the use of a capital letter within a word, hyphens, gender-asterisks, *point median*, etc.) Here, the generic masculine is rejected on the basis of its continuously implied binary perspective and there are instead increasing calls for the neutralisation of gender opposition (cf. Ossenkop 2020: 41, 43, 47; Fagard/Le Tallec 2021: 10). The French language academy has taken a stand in opposition to inclusive written language, arguing that this would lead to confusion and illegibility (*confusion et illisibilité*) (Académie française 2017; Knisely 2020: 853). Along with the argument regarding legibility vs. illegibility, the debate for

and against inclusive language in the French language includes discussion of the following aspects, some of which are linguistically based or even laden with language ideology: the visibility vs. the invisibility of women, whether inclusive language contradicts or reflects current language use, the problem of how to verbally incorporate certain inclusive forms and the change or disruption to the linearity of the character string in the written language.

Over the past several years, there has been a call for the systematic expansion of genus-neutral and non-binary forms (*genre neutre* – cf. Alpheratz 2021: 231ff., also *langue neutre*) on a morphological and grammatical level. In French, genus is marked, for example, in 3rd-person subject and object pronouns in both singular and plural, in possessives (*mon/ton/son/ma/ta/sa*), demonstratives (*ce/cette*) and indefinites (*chacun/chacune, certain/certaine*); in addition, genus-marking is sometimes used in adjectives and participles. Recommendations have been made for non-binary markings, including the use of *-x*, *-z*, *-æ* (*seulx, touz, occupæ*), genus-neutral pronouns such as *iels/illes/els* ('they'), *voues* (formal form of 'you') as well as neutral suffixes, such as *-èles* in *professionèles* rather than *professionnels/professionnelles* (masculine/feminine) and these are also being addressed in the public media (cf. Alpheratz 2021: 231ff.; Manesse 2019: 51; Ossenkop 2020: 47; Nayves/Arbour 2021: 147; Große 2025). For example, the 2021 incorporation of the genus-neutral pronominal form in the singular *iel* in the French general dictionary *Le Robert* triggered a debate that culminated in November 2021 with a demand for an authoritative decision on the part of the *Académie française* (cf. Moïnard 2023).⁴ This demand for an authoritative solution is a recurring element within numerous language ideological and language critical discourses in France (cf. Siouffi 2019: 21).

4 Cf. <https://twitter.com/fjolivet36/status/1460629818446422016> (last accessed on 30/05/2025).

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