

SOCIOLINGUISTIC ASPECTS OF THE FEMINISATION OF NAMES OF PROFESSIONS IN THE CONTEMPORARY FRENCH LANGUAGE

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Abstract

The access of women in all fields of activity has provoked fierce linguistic polemics on feminisation of names of professions which has represented a wide range of linguistic investigations in France and in many French-speaking countries such as Canada, Belgium and Switzerland.

This paper aims to examine the manifestation of the process of feminisation of names of professions in the French press, in other words, to observe how feminisation of names of professions in the French written media discourse is applied, knowing the fact that the press represents a favourable environment in which two areas conjugate, namely, the society and linguistics. Therefore, this study is part of a sociolinguistic framework and will follow two approaches, one regulatory, related to linguistic habits and the other, innovative, revealed by the actual language-based practices that concern the visibility of women on the linguistic level.

This micro research is justified by the assumption already advanced that the media has a very important role in the enrichment of languages, accompanying the evolution of the society by familiarizing the readers with new forms denoting new realities, thereby facilitating their further use.

The objectives of this study are the study in the French press of the feminine forms used to designate women, comparing these forms to those indicated in the feminization guides and the Dictionary of the French Academy, which is the linguistic norm. The second part of the study is dedicated to analysing the procedures used to create the feminine form, in case of finding a lexical variation, but also explaining the factors favouring the option of using a form or another.

Keywords: French, sociolinguistics, feminisation, names of profession.

1 INTRODUCTION

With the culmination of the parity in politics and the equality of opportunity between men and women, we also observe linguistically, an acceleration of the feminization in the field of profession names in French. The choice of the theme is motivated by practical reasons, namely, we often encounter hesitations regarding the name of active women increasingly numerous in various fields. This study wants itself to be enrolled in a sociolinguistic framework, aiming the feminization of names of professions in French, an issue that has stirred spirits in many Francophone countries (French-speaking Belgium, Switzerland, Quebec, France).

Any Language evolves, mainly under the pressure of the public and media use, therefore, we will focus on the application of the feminization of names of professions in written media discourse. Newspapers consulting seems judicial, since we cannot find a better indicator to see the trends in the current language.

2 RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

To contextualize the practice of this micro research, we exposed briefly in the first part, the extra-linguistic reality whose linguistic reflection will be represented by the analysed material. We inserted in this presentation, conclusions about the political debates caused by the feminization as a consequence of parity and rights equality, followed by the presentation of the development of gender issues.

We illustrated the representativeness of women in the workplace and the linguistic reflection in France and other French-speaking countries to show the distinctions from one nation to another, even being francophone.

In the practical part, we insisted on studying specific aspects of the use of the feminine form, as feminization processes, rules requiring distribution of females, differences between national feminization guides and the Dictionary of the French Academy.

Our study aims the use of the feminine forms in the French press, fertile ground for lexical innovation. After the registration of feminine forms, we will study the processes used in the formation of various forms of feminine in this category of nouns. If we notice a lexical variation, we will try to explain which are the factors guiding the use to a special form in the practice of the feminization and the causes and consequences of refusing or encouraging the feminization of names of professions in French.

3 HYPOTHESIS

These issues lead us to formulate the following hypothesis:

The first hypothesis is the fact that there could be a wide range of feminine forms corresponding to the same masculine form because inside the guides of feminization of the Francophone countries (Belgium, Switzerland, and Quebec, France) there are suggested forms distinct from forms in the Dictionary of the French Academy and then users use one form or another depending on their language needs. Therefore, we want to see how strong indications of feminization guides and Dictionary of the French Academy are accompanied by lexical innovations in daily practice.

From here, the second hypothesis emerges, namely, the use favors the feminization of names of professions as the opposition of the French Academy under the pretext of respecting the language, would create problems, allowing us to study gaps and difficulties that might be created by the refusal the feminization names of professions by those who break any attempt of innovation of a living language with evolutionary character.

4 RESULTS

We held briefly in the following lines the theoretical framework of the large debate which caused the feminist movement. The nineteenth century was marked by attempts to improve the position of women, but only in the twentieth century there are visible progress regarding women's rights, by a decree published on June 26, 1945, in Article 55 of the United Nations Charter, which recognizes women equal to men: *„With a view to the creation of conditions of stability and well-being which are necessary for peaceful and friendly relations among nations based on respect for the principle of equal rights and self-determination of peoples, the United Nations shall promote: [...] c. universal respect for, and observance of, human rights and fundamental freedoms for all without distinction as to race, sex, language, or religion“* (the International Court of Justice, 1945, p. 11).

So there have been created new rights for women, who are starting to play an important role in society, changes that were not predictable in the previous centuries. The evolution of women's rights toward an egalitarian life knows an evolution in society, leading to the adoption of new habits in any field. Since language is a tool which we use to call things on their names, it must adapt itself to social developments and accept the new position occupied by women.

In France, the first discussion about the feminization of language was provoked by three women minister who wanted to be called *„Madame la Ministre“*. Yvette Roudy, the Minister of women's rights at the time, decided to create a committee of terminology, chaired by Benoîte Groult. The objective of the committee instituted by the Decree of 29 February 1984 as reflected in Article 1, was to deal with the blanks of the French language regarding the feminine forms of names of profession and *„bring legitimacy to social functions and professions exercised by women“* (L., 1984, p. 770).

The Terminology Commission has prepared a set of rules allowing the feminization of majority of names of professions, degrees, positions or titles.

In a circular published on March 11, 1886, the Prime Minister Laurent Fabius explains the need to adapt the vocabulary to women's access to different positions and recommends „to ensure the use of such terms“ (L., 1896, p. 4267).

The debate on feminization was resumed in the newspapers *Le Monde* and *Le Figaro* during December 1997 - March 1998, on the occasion of the assignment of more women in higher positions of government, when women have realized that the language does not follow the evolution of society, as in the social hierarchy of that time, there were used for the profession names still the masculine form, which represented in their view, an obstacle to the social status of women.

In 1998, the Prime Minister of the time, Lionel Jospin, supported by the President of the Republic, Jacques Chirac, took steps to amend the administrative and official texts, despite the opposition of Government General Secretariat lawyers.

On March 6, 1998, Lionel Jospin has submitted a letter to the Government, reminding them the need for using the feminization of names of professions, degrees, positions or titles in official documents of state, and also pointing out the use of the feminization guide realized by the National Institute of the French language. (L., 1998, p. 3565)

So, the importance of this topic is visible, given the debates of politicians and linguists who have felt compelled to express their views through circulars and articles in national newspapers.

Language must take into account the effects of the feminization of social structures, but also their socio-political context. The problem of feminization of names of professions is not new, but France must catch up to other French-speaking countries such as Quebec, French-speaking Belgium and Switzerland that have issued various texts governing the official administrative use.

But the French Academy is in opposition to the feminization of names of professions, funding its arguments on two essential points: one linguistic, explaining that this intervention could harm the French language, and the other linked to the notion of use, showing that the change in the grammar will not alter the social situation of women.

The French Academy, through its representatives, Claude Lévi-Strauss and Georges Dumézil explains in a statement made on June 14, 1984 that within the other Indo-European languages there is no report of similarity between grammatical gender and natural gender. French language uses the two genders, the masculine and the feminine and the only way to define these genders is in the distinction marked gender and unmarked gender. The masculine gender is the unmarked gender called extensive as it indicates both male and female, while the feminine is the marked or intensive gender, and it makes the segregation between the sexes (Lévi-Strauss, C. & Dumézil, G., 1984).

French Academy concludes that to restore the vocabulary in favour of gender equality, it should be avoided the terms of feminine gender in cases not consecrated in use and that it is preferable to use professional names of unmarked gender, if we have a choice.

Elizabeth Dawes (Dawes, 2003, p. 206) shows that the morphological and syntactic structure of French language provides us with three possibilities of describing professions, like: the unique gender – masculine (*un docteur*) or, more rarely, the feminine (*une doctoresse*) –, the minimalist feminisation, by epicenes (*un(e) docteur*) and the maximalist feminization, by suffixation (*une doctoresse*). They are individually subject to criticism, so feminists complain that masculine gender (*le ministre*) makes women invisible in the language level, even in society, while the French Academy claims that the unique feminine gender (*sage-femme*) excludes men. The distinction to the marked gender indicated by article (epicene) is deleted on plural (*le ministre, la ministre, les ministres*). In addition, the feminine forms often have pejorative connotations forms (*poétesse*) or create embarrassing contexts, with sexual notes (*entraîneuse*).

In the table below, we compare on a sample that we consider representative, the differences between some feminine nouns as they appear in the indicative lists of the feminization guides in Quebec, Belgium, France and Switzerland.

Au féminin: guide de féminisation des titres de fonction et des textes QUÉBEC 1991	Mettre au féminin BELGIQUE 1994	Femme, j'écris ton nom... FRANCE 1999	Écrire les genres SUISSE 2001 – Le nouveau Dictionnaire féminin – masculin des professions, des titres et des fonctions Thérèse Moreau 1999	Dictionnaire de l'Académie
Une auteure	Une auteur	Un auteur, une auteure	Une autrice	Auteur – n. m.
Une chef	Une chef	Un chef	Une cheffe	Chef – n. m.
Une consule	Une consule	Un consule	Une consulesse	Consul – n. m.
Une écrivaine	Une écrivain	Une écrivaine	Une écrivaine	Ecrivain – n. m.
Une ingénieure	Une ingénieur	Un ingénieur, une ingénieure	Une ingénieure	Ingénieur – n. m. Une femme ingénieure
Une médecin	Une médecin	Un médecin	Une médecin	Médecin – n. m. Une femme médecin
Une poète	Une poète, une poétesse	Un poète, une poétesse	Une poétesse	Poète – n. m.
Une professeure	Une professeur, une professeure	Un professeur, une professeure	Une professeure	Professeur – n. m.

Fig. 1. Feminine nouns in the guide of feminization

The official guides present the feminine forms that comply with the grammar rules. These guidelines were drawn up after years of hesitation and linguistic and socio-cultural debates and they also brings together the exact rules to help the speakers to acquire easier the new forms of feminine nouns.

In the following table, we inserted the same nouns and their occurrences in the press in the same countries:

QUÉBEC	BELGIA	FRANȚA	ELVEȚIA
Une auteure	Une auteur	Un auteur	Une autrice
Un chef	Une chef	Un chef	Une cheffe
Une consule	Une consule	Un consul	Une consulesse
Une écrivaine	Une écrivain	Un écrivain	Une écrivaine
Une ingénieure	Une ingénieur	Un ingénieur	Une ingénieure
Une médecin	Une médecin	Un médecin	Une médecin
Une poète	Une poète	Un poète	Une poétesse
Une professeure	Une professeur	Un professeur	Une professeure

Fig. 2. Feminine nouns in the francophone press

Analysing these tables, we can remark that France still resist to feminization, the French keeping the masculine form for expressing feminine. Although feminization hasn't won favours of French Academy, we can observe that journalists apply more frequently, but not systematically, modern rules of feminisation of names of professions.

While Belgium is closer to France in terms of its conception about feminization, the Swiss who want the amendment to be maximal, adopt the suffixation to express the feminine, but also the innovations such as in the case of *cheffe*, but also the conservatism as *autrice*, *consulesse*, *écrivaine*, *poétesse*, preferring feminine forms distinguished not only in writing, but also orally.

Canadians prefer the minimalist form, only graphics with the addition of *-e*: *auteure*, *chercheure*, *docteure*, the forms in *-eure* being described by the author of Nouveau Petit Robert Dictionary, Josette Rey-Debove as „militant barbarisms“ (Rey-Debove, J., 1998, p.16). This phenomenon might be explained by the influence of

English, which tends to levelling genders, as sustains Elisabeth Dawes (Dawes, 2003, p. 209). Itsuko Fujimura (2005) also infers that we must realize that, in our multicultural world, the influence of languages between them is common.

Belgium differs from Canada and Switzerland in opting for epicene forms, for the nouns ending in *-eur*: *un(e) auteur, un(e) ingénieur, un(e) docteur, un(e) professeur*. So, for Josette Rey-Debove (Belgians are closer than Canadians to the French sensitivity „not *auteure* with *-e*, but *une auteur* being in line with abstract nouns: *la frayeur* et *la pesanteur* etc.“ (Rey-Debove, 1999, p. 60).

The table containing the names taken from the press allows us to observe that there are as many forms as many linguistic communities (*un auteur, une auteure, une autrice*). Most of the times, Canada is alloyed either to Switzerland (*écrivaine, ingénieure, professeure*) or to Belgium (*chef, consule, poète*), but we also notice the situation in which the three countries have a unanimous view (*médecin*). Michèle Lenoble-Pinson (Lenoble-Pinson, 2006, p. 644) argues that Canadians sometimes tend to depart from the traditional rules because they would want to standardize how to make feminine by adding *-e* systematically to the masculine form, except when the noun ends already in that vowel (*chercheure*).

5 CONCLUSION

We could notice that the evolution of feminisation of French found inspiration and motor in the debates and in the progression of extra linguistic feminisation, as language evolves in parallel with the status of women in society. We found the ambitions of emancipation of women and their tendency to refuse using the masculine to designate their profession.

At first glance, the feminisation of names of professions may seem only a matter strictly related to grammar, but in fact, it is a phenomenon deeply rooted in feminism. Given that the position of women never ceases to evolve, we anticipate that we will witness in the future to metamorphosis of the vocabulary. Specialists in linguistics expressed their view that the French should seek and accept the changes occurring in society. Elisabeth Dawes (Dawes, 2003) states that, as a linguistic system, French language is neutral, leaving to users the care to make their own choice, the constraints involving, are not due to the language, but to the speakers imposing their ideology in language. And therefore, the feminisation of names of professions is not a linguistic problem, but a problem of society, not linked to morphological forms of the words, but to the social status of their referent, because we can say *une secrétaire*, but we cannot say *une secrétaire d'État*.

A comparison of the use of the terms designing prestigious professions in France, Belgium, Switzerland and Canada reveals significant regional differences and suggests that the internal structure of the French language allows a great latitude to speakers in the creation of feminine names of professions.

But there are, of course, conservative experts who oppose to any change for fear of negative influences on language that could be exercised by these radical changes. But in our opinion, the language is a reflection of trends in human life, and therefore we should enrich the vocabulary with new words to help the speakers to express themselves easier and to „translate better“ the new extra-linguistic context.

The second hypothesis discussed the formal restrictions and the barriers that do not allow us to form a feminine noun after existing rules. If the linguists do not find a feminine equivalent of the masculine noun appointing a profession, they must create a new form, not yet existing or they use an existing noun, but which has a different meaning. In this situation, it may happen that speakers reject the created form and refuse to use it.

Even if sometimes, the society considers that feminists exaggerate, we believe that the right way to appoint a person represents the only possibility to give him / her a good representation.

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