What's in a word? How less-gendered language is faring across Europe

A contentious vote in the French senate is only the latest battleground in the culture war over inclusive language
The latest skirmish in the culture war over inclusive language has been playing out this week in France, where the senate voted in favour of a proposal to ban the use of less-gendered terms in official documents.

Les Républicains, the centre-right party behind the move, had claimed that inclusive neologisms such as iel - a mix of the male and female pronouns il and elle - and more general efforts to end the entrenched masculine bias in French were part of an “ideology that endangers the clarity of our language”.

Similar arguments are taking place across Europe and beyond as people - from politicians to parents - debate the role language should play in protecting and promoting diversity, inclusion and representation. In countries whose languages have male and female nouns, the issue is proving particularly challenging.

**France**

Opposition sénateurs and sénatrices disagreed with the outcome of Monday’s vote, describing it as a “retrograde and reactionary” text, a view shared by France’s independent high commission for equality between women and men.

To become law, the bill would have to be passed in the Assemblée Nationale and there is no date set for a debate. There are, however, growing calls to make gendered French less sexist - a campaign that has been around since the 1980s but which has been rejected by the influential Académie Française, the guardian of the language.

What irks campaigners most is that French grammatical rules make the masculine form of a noun the default over the female. So, women on an all-female board of company directors are called directrices; if one man joins the board, they are referred to collectively as directeurs.
This was defended by the president, Emmanuel Macron, this week when he said: “In this language, the masculine acts as the neutral.” (Macron, however addresses citizens as *les Français et les Françaises* - and not the strictly correct *les Français*.)

But, as the academy has pointed out, suggestions for inclusive writing can render the written language unreadable, and thus arguably less - not more - inclusive.

The most popular method is the use of the “median dot” to include both masculine and feminine, as in, *Cher·e·s ami·e·s* (Dear friends), which is sometimes replaced by a hyphen (*cher-e-s ami-e-s*), by parentheses (*cher(e)s ami(e)s*), or by slashes (*cher/e/s ami/e/s*).

According to the academy, all the above not only “offend the democracy of language” but also create difficulties for those with dyslexia and dysphasia, and for non-French speakers who are learning the language.

“Far from attracting the support of a majority of contemporaries, it appears to be the preserve of an elite, unaware of the difficulties encountered on a daily basis by educators and users of the school system,” the academy said in a statement.
Small steps, however, have been made. In 2019, the academy decided it was acceptable to say *madame la maire, la ministre, la juge*, despite being masculine nouns.

### Q&A

**How did gendered languages evolve?**

#### Germany

In German, unlike in English, all nouns are grammatically coded as either masculine (*der*), feminine (*die*) or neuter (*das*). A male citizen is a *Bürger*, a female citizen a *Bürgerin*, and no one is seriously trying to change that.

But, as in France, there is growing frustration with the fact that the masculine form is traditionally used to refer to groups of people, even if that group is made up of a mix of males and females.

Because Germany does not have a national body to prescribe or standardise language use, people have been free to experiment in order to fix this problem. Attempts to make generic nouns more inclusive have been around since the 1980s but used to be relatively marginal phenomena: the “gender gap” (*Bürger_innen*) has been used in queer communities, while feminist groups more commonly capitalise the i (*BürgerInnen*).

Over the last 10 years, however, the use of an asterisk or “gender star” in generic forms (*Bürger*innen) has started to be used outside subcultural groups or academic circles. Many universities, schools and some government bodies, such as the federal environment agency, recommend the use of the asterisk in their internal communications.

“The gender star is still not used by the majority of people in German society, but it has seen an impressive rise in a relatively short time,” said Anatol Stefanowitsch, a linguist at Berlin’s Freie Universität.

It has also inspired a backlash from political parties on the right, with the populist Alternative für Deutschland putting its opposition to “gender gaga” at the heart of its 2021 election campaign. In the eastern state of Saxony, the Christian Democrat government has banned the use of gender stars or gender gaps at schools or educational authorities, meaning that *Schüler*innen would be marked as a mistake in students’ homework.
“Conservatives have discovered gender-inclusive language as a potent subject for their culture wars,” Stefanowitsch said. “We are currently witnessing attempts to steer language use through the state, even if for now only at a regional level, which is a new phenomenon.”

**Spain**
In April 2021, Spain’s equality minister, Irene Montero, gave a speech in Madrid in which she attacked the rightwing regional government for its attitude to LGBTQ+ rights. But it wasn’t the sentiment that made headlines - it was the language. Montero deliberately used male, female and gender-neutral terms, referring to “libertad para todos, para todas y para todes” (“freedom for all men, all women and all gender-neutral people”). She also spoke of “su hijo, hija e hije” - “your son, daughter or gender-neutral child” - and of niño, niña y niñe (boy, girl and gender-neutral child).
Her use of the terms has been ridiculed by her opponents and become yet another weapon in the culture wars between left and right. In 2018, the socialist deputy prime minister, Carmen Calvo, was criticised when she called for an overhaul of the Spanish constitution, arguing it was all written “in the masculine” because it used the male form to refer to “ministers and MPs”.

The then head of the Real Academia Española (RAE) - the body that oversees the evolution of the Spanish language - replied by counselling against “confusing grammar with sexism” and saying that economy should always be the guiding principle of language. “False solutions, such as using -e instead of -o and -a, are absurd, ridiculous and totally inefficient,” said Darío Villanueva.

In a 156-page report published in January 2020, the RAE said changes in language should be driven by common usage rather than edicts from on high. It did, however, stress that, as in France and Germany, the masculine plural, such as pasajeros (passengers), remained the unmarked or default form to cover both men and women, adding that it was both commonly used and inclusive. Saying pasajeros, it continued, “does not render female passengers invisible nor does it disrespect them”.

**Italy**

Giorgia Meloni has made her position on the gender-inclusive language debate clear. Soon after becoming Italy’s first female prime minister, the ultra-conservative Meloni issued a note to journalists saying her preferred title of Presidente del Consiglio (President of the Council of Ministers) ought to be preceded by the masculine article *il* rather than the feminine *la*.
The decision sparked controversy, with the leftwing politician Laura Boldrini saying: “There is something strange about her; she hides behind the masculine.” Meloni sarcastically hit back that she did not think a woman’s “greatness” should be defined by being called capatrena - a nonexistent feminine form of capotreno, or train conductor.

A few months later, the Accademia della Crusca, watchdog of the Italian language, said Italy’s courts ought to stick to tradition and avoid the “novelty” of gender-neutral symbols in legal documents.

In Italian, gender-neutral noun endings to get around the masculine default include asterisks or the so-called schwa, a symbol that looks like an inverted e. The language watchdog argued that using gender-neutral nouns, for example when addressing the recipient of a letter with car* instead of the male caro or female cara (dear), would be artificial and only supported by minority groups.

Luisa Rizzitelli, a feminist and LGBTQ+ activist, said: “A lot of experimentation has come from the LGBTQ+ and feminist movement, and there is no shortage of heated debates about this: some people use the asterisk, x, u, y, slash, apostrophe, schwa, etc. Non-binary people in particular use these possibilities, which are innovative for the Italian language and increasingly widespread.”
Rizzitelli said the "common point" at the heart of the debate was the "legitimate need not to feel erased; the right to see a language capable of recognising and thus respecting one's choices", adding: "Non-binary people have every right to value this battle."