

The Power of Words

Sometimes a playground, sometimes a minefield, language accompanies and reflects social change. While some words are discarded or even banned, others emerge and carve out a place for themselves in common usage: degrowth, dead-name, *vax*¹ (which is morphologically very productive!). Language is alive, it evolves, and it is transformed to the rhythm of the events or ruptures that impact societies.

Current linguistic debates are abundant, but also divisive. Even though it has been discussed for a long time now, the question of inclusive writing is one that continues to rage in the French-speaking world. If there is a consensus on certain issues—let’s think in particular about the feminization of titles (*professeure, chercheuse, autrice*) implemented in Quebec since the 1970s (40 years before its appearance in France!)—, there are also confrontations, which are brutal at times.

Among these are the issues surrounding the visibility of women and non-binary people in the French language. These include full doublets (e.g., *l'étudiant et l'étudiante*), abbreviated doublets with a middle point (e.g., *les professeur-es, les étudiant-es*), and the controversial pronoun *iel*, all of which offend many sensibilities. While these strategies make the style more cumbersome and present an additional challenge for people with reading difficulties, they also clearly emphasize that the masculine does not necessarily take precedence over the feminine,² at least not linguistically.

Although inclusive writing is a controversial issue, its principles and codes are becoming more visible and audible in higher education because they are making a real contribution to the work on inclusion, whatever one might think. Guidelines are being put in place at colleges and universities, and guides and checklists are being made available to those who wish to move toward a more inclusive form of communication.

From another perspective, what is the point of spending time and energy on inclusive communication when there are more important and pressing challenges facing education and higher education? Part of the answer lies in the fact that language allows the individual to become part of

a social reality. Through language, individuals assert their personhood, externalize the reality that inhabits them and internalize the reality that surrounds them.³ Following this logic, how to “be” without the words that characterize us? How can we project ourselves into a reality, a profession, a status if there are no words to represent ourselves? Of course, questions about language are partly political and subject to power games, but we must not lose sight of the fact that language is also an important marker of culture and identity.

The other part of the answer depends on each person’s principles and priorities. To the question, “Why spend energy on inclusive communication?” I would simply answer that I don’t think someone can express new ideas without saying the words that name them. From a practical point of view, I would also say that it’s also possible to “walk and chew gum at the same time”!

Why talk about inclusive writing in this editorial of *Pédagogie collégiale*? Because this reflection, although it extends beyond the college context as such, obviously has an impact on it, but also because in this issue we offer a series of articles on inclusion... written using inclusive principles in the original French language version! Also, because when considering it more closely, the power of words—whether written, spoken or read—reveals itself to be a cross-cutting theme in many of the articles published in these pages. ■

¹ The avid reader can find out more about Oxford Dictionary’s word of the year and other recent additions [<https://languages.oup.com/world-of-the-year/2021/> and <https://public.oed.com/updates/>]

² The rule that “the masculine takes precedence over the feminine” is also relatively recent. It was proclaimed in the 18th century. Before that, the place given to women in the French language was much more egalitarian than it is today.

³ GAUVIN, L. “La construction langagière, identitaire et culturelle : un cadre conceptuel pour l’école francophone en milieu minoritaire,” *Cahiers franco-canadiens de l’Ouest*, vol. 21, n° 1-2, 2009, p. 92 [<https://doi.org/10.7202/045325ar>].



Anne-Marie Paquette
 Editor-in-Chief, *Pédagogie collégiale*
 revue@aqpcc.ca