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Guardians of Grammar, Gatekeepers of Gender: A Critical Discourse Analysis of the Académie Française's Report on the Feminization of Professional Titles

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Abstract: This article examines how the Académie française constructs its institutional position on the feminization of professional and official titles

in French. Using Fairclough's three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and integrating Feminist CDA (Lazar, 2005), the study analyzes the Académie's 2019 report as a case of symbolic discourse management. It investigates how feminization is framed linguistically, discursively, and ideologically. At the textual level, the report employs hedging, modality, and passive constructions to convey caution and deflect institutional responsibility. At the discursive level, the Académie constructs an image of neutrality and methodological restraint while subtly delegitimizing feminist discourse through rhetorical distancing. At the sociocultural level, feminization is normalized in lower-prestige professions but resisted in elite or masculine-coded domains, maintaining symbolic gender hierarchies. Legal and international considerations are mobilized to justify procedural caution. The analysis reveals three cross-level patterns: cautious distancing, symbolic boundary maintenance, and discursive deferral. These findings demonstrate that the Académie's discourse not only reflects but actively manages institutional authority, gender norms, and the boundaries of acceptable linguistic change. The study contributes to debates on language policy and gender equality by framing feminization as a site of ideological governance rather than grammatical evolution.

Keywords: Académie française, critical discourse analysis, feminization, gender and language, institutional discourse

Introduction

The French language has long been regulated by grammatical conventions that privilege the masculine form as the default. In recent decades, however, increasing societal attention to gender equity and inclusion has sparked growing debate about whether French should evolve to reflect changing social realities. Central to this debate is the feminization of professional and official titles, along with the broader adoption of *écriture inclusive* [inclusive writing], which challenge the universality of masculine generics and aim to enhance the visibility of women and gender minorities in language.

While inclusive forms have gained traction in academic, activist, and corporate settings, institutional resistance remains strong—particularly from legacy bodies that shape linguistic authority. Chief among them is the Académie française, a centuries-old institution that defines the boundaries of “correct” French. Its 2019 report *La féminisation des noms de métiers et de fonctions* [The feminization of job and official titles] articulates the Académie’s stance on feminization. Though carefully avoiding overt ideological claims, the report repeatedly invokes terms like *bon usage* [proper usage] and *souplesse* [flexibility] to assert a preference for stability, deferring reform to the pace of collective usage and presenting linguistic evolution as a passive process.

This paper analyzes how the Académie française enacts discursive leadership in managing institutional authority, public legitimacy, and gender inclusivity through language. Drawing on *Critical Discourse Analysis* (Fairclough, 1995; van Dijk, 1993) and *Feminist CDA* (Lazar, 2005), the study examines how feminization is not only framed as a grammatical issue, but as a matter of symbolic governance. Although prior studies (e.g., Janoušková, 2015; Dawes, 2003) have surveyed feminization policies across Francophone contexts, few have explored how the Académie itself uses discourse to manage ideological boundaries and exert control over change.

Positioning the Académie as a case of symbolic and institutional discourse management, the study demonstrates how its rhetorical strategies regulate not only linguistic norms but also the tempo and scope of gender reform. In doing so, it contributes to broader conversations about how language functions as a form of organizational leadership—particularly in navigating inclusion, authority, and cultural legitimacy.

Literature Review

This study builds on three main areas of research: critical discourse analysis (CDA), feminist approaches to language and power, and previous studies on *écriture inclusive* [inclusive writing] and institutional reactions to it. These frameworks are useful for understanding how powerful institutions like

the Académie française use language to resist or slow down social and linguistic change.

Feminization

In the context of this study, feminization refers to the creation, recognition, and promotion of feminine forms for professional and official titles in grammatically gendered languages like French. While some feminized forms have existed for centuries—such as *actrice* or *infirmière*—their usage has often been limited to roles considered traditionally ‘feminine’ or less prestigious. In contrast, titles associated with authority or institutional power—such as *ambassadeur*, *professeur*, or *chef*—have long resisted feminization, not always for linguistic reasons, but often due to social and ideological factors (Janoušková, 2015; Dawes, 2003).

From a sociolinguistic perspective, feminization is not only a morphological process, but also a symbolic intervention. As Pauwels (1998) explains, it challenges the idea that masculine forms can function as neutral or universal. This default status of the masculine often described as *le masculin générique* [male generic] has contributed to a long-standing invisibility of women and gender minorities in official discourse. Feminization seeks to correct this imbalance by making gendered presence visible in language. However, as Viennot (2014) shows, many feminine forms that once existed in earlier French (e.g., *autrice*) were intentionally removed from dictionaries and official usage, particularly in the 17th and 18th centuries, as part of a broader masculinization of language.

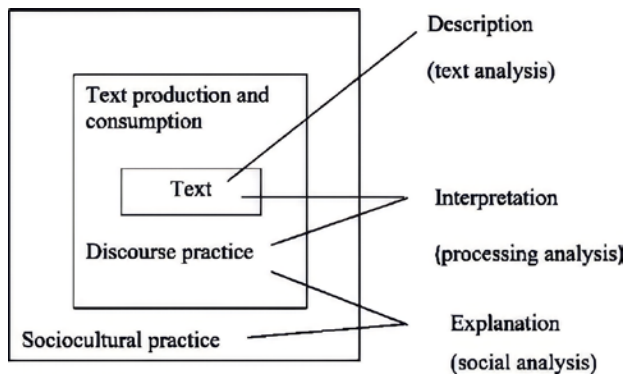
In this sense, feminization goes beyond terminology. It is a way to question who gets to be represented, who defines linguistic norms, and how language reflects or resists social change. This study draws on these theoretical perspectives to explore how the Académie française, a highly symbolic language institution, engages with feminization in its official discourse—particularly through strategies that frame reform as either premature, unstable, or subject to societal approval rather than institutional initiative.

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA)

Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) is a useful approach for studying how language is connected to power and ideology. According to Fairclough (1989, 1995), discourse is not just about words or grammar; it is also a form of social practice. This means that when people or institutions use language, they are also shaping and maintaining the structures of society. Fairclough's model involves three levels:

- 1) The textual level—how the language is structured, what vocabulary is chosen, and what grammar is used.
- 2) The discursive practice—how the text is produced, distributed, and understood.
- 3) The sociocultural practice—what broader ideologies or power relations the text reflects.

Figure 1. Fairclough's 3D model of critical discourse analysis



Source: Fairclough (1989, 1995).

This model is very relevant when analyzing the language used in official reports. For example, the Académie française, which is responsible for protecting the French language, often uses formal and academic language in its publications. This gives the impression that their views are neutral or based purely on grammar.

But through CDA, we can see that these linguistic choices can also reflect deeper beliefs about gender, tradition, and who has the right to control the language.

In addition to Fairclough, van Dijk (1993) adds another important perspective. He focuses on how discourse shapes the way people think—not just what is said, but how ideas are organized and presented. Van Dijk highlights that powerful groups, such as governments, media, or language authorities, often use discourse to control public opinion and maintain their position in society. In this case, we can use his ideas to examine how the Académie presents its opposition to inclusive writing as logical or objective, while framing supporters of change as emotional or ideological.

Together, Fairclough and van Dijk provide a strong foundation for analyzing institutional discourse. Their models help reveal how power can be maintained through language, even in subtle, polite or implicit ways.

Feminist CDA and Linguistic Sexism

While CDA provides the general framework, this study also uses Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA) to focus more specifically on gender. Lazar (2005) points out that mainstream discourse often hides or downplays gender inequality. FCDA tries to show how language supports male dominance—even in texts that appear neutral. It looks for patterns in how women and men are described, who is given voice, and what kinds of roles are made visible or invisible in language.

Cameron (1992) also criticizes the idea that language is just a mirror of society. Instead, she argues that language plays a role in creating gender roles and expectations. In her view, linguistic forms are not only shaped by culture but are also used to shape it in return. For example, when masculine forms are used as the 'default' in French (e.g., *les citoyens* [the citizens] to refer to a mixed group), this not only reflects male-centered thinking but also reinforces it in the minds of speakers.

Another important work is by Pauwels (1998), who looks at how women remain underrepresented in grammatically gendered languages like French. She argues that even when women enter new roles in society, the language often does not catch up. Words like *madame l'ambassadeur* [Madam the (masculine)

ambassador] or madame *le maire* [Madam the (masculine) mayor] for a woman show how the masculine form continues to dominate official and public language. This shows how linguistic structures can slow down social progress by keeping masculine forms as the ‘norm’.

These feminist works support the idea that grammar is not only about structure but also about ideology. They help us ask further questions: Why are some forms seen as ‘neutral’? Who decides which forms are acceptable? And what happens when people try to change the language?

Écriture Inclusive and Institutional Resistance

The third area focuses on *écriture inclusive* [inclusive writing] and the pushback it receives, especially from institutions. One of the most well-known voices in this field is Éliane Viennot (2014), who argues that opposition to inclusive writing is not really about grammar—it’s about keeping male-centered norms in place. She shows that many feminine forms existed in earlier versions of French, like *autrice* [authoress], but were later removed on purpose to strengthen masculine dominance. Her research helps to challenge the idea that masculine forms are more ‘natural’ or ‘logical’.

Other studies have looked at how feminization and inclusive writing are being received in different areas. Dawes (2003) studies how different Francophone countries approach the feminization of job titles. She shows that regions like Québec and Belgium have institutionalized feminization more readily, while France has demonstrated greater resistance, often citing tradition and linguistic stability as reasons for delaying reform. Janoušková (2015) focuses on how certain feminine forms have disappeared from standard French—not because they were incorrect, but because they were *politically inconvenient*.

More recently, Boutron and Weber (2022) examine how the French military has reacted to inclusive language and feminization. Their study shows that even in modern institutions, there is still a lot of resistance, often hidden behind claims of professionalism, neutrality, or efficiency. This resistance, they argue, is part of a larger pattern of controlling how gender is represented in public space.

Although these works give us a good picture of the debates around inclusive writing, very few have analyzed how the Académie française talks about these issues in its own words. The Academy holds a special place in French society—it not only sets the rules of grammar but also carries symbolic power as the guardian of national identity. Yet, the discourse it produces has not been studied in detail using tools like CDA or FCDA. This study aims to fill that gap by analyzing the Académie's 2019 report on the feminization of job titles. It will focus not only on what the Academy says, but how it says it—and what that reveals about the power of language in shaping public attitudes toward gender and change.

Objectives and Hypotheses of the Research

This study aims to investigate how institutional discourse, particularly that of the Académie française, contributes to shaping the linguistic landscape in relation to gender and language reform. Drawing on the frameworks of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Feminist CDA, the research sets out the following objectives and hypotheses:

Objectives:

- 1) To examine the linguistic features and rhetorical strategies used in the Académie française's report on the feminization of professional and official titles, focusing on how specific lexical choices, syntactic patterns, and modal expressions shape the institutional stance.
- 2) To analyze how discourse functions at both the discursive and sociocultural levels to maintain traditional language norms, manage institutional authority, and respond to ongoing debates about gender inclusivity in French language policy.

Hypotheses:

- 1) The report employs linguistic strategies such as hedging, nominalization, and appeals to *bon usage* [proper usage] to reinforce the Académie's

image as neutral and tradition-bound, thereby discouraging rapid language change.

- 2) At the discursive and sociocultural levels, the Académie's discourse contributes to sustaining male-centered language norms and institutional power by presenting feminization as unstable, non-universal, or socially premature.

Methodology

This study adopts a qualitative research design informed by principles of Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) and Feminist Critical Discourse Analysis (FCDA), focusing on the *Rapport sur la féminisation des noms de métiers et de fonctions* published by the Académie française in 2019. The aim is to examine how institutional discourse constructs, negotiates, and constrains the feminization of occupational titles in French, and to reveal the ideological positions embedded within the report.

Corpus Presentation

The corpus selected for this study is the 2019 report titled *La féminisation des noms de métiers, titres, grades et fonctions*, published by the Académie française. As the institution's most detailed and formal statement on the subject to date, the document offers a structured articulation of its stance on the feminization of professional and official titles in the French language. Divided into four main sections, the report addresses: (I) the evolving sociolinguistic context that has prompted renewed attention to gendered language; (II) the methodology adopted by the Académie, including the creation of a dedicated commission; (III) the linguistic treatment of job titles, with attention to morphological patterns and usage; and (IV) considerations related to titles of function, honorific ranks, and legal constraints.

The following sub-sections provide a concise presentation of each part of the report and intend to foreground the content of the text before turning to their critical analysis.

Part I—The Context (Le contexte)

The first part of the report outlines the sociolinguistic context that frames the debate on the feminization of professional and official titles. It acknowledges that, in recent decades, French-speaking societies—particularly France—have experienced profound social changes, most notably the increased presence of women in a wide range of professions and public functions. Despite this shift, linguistic practices have not evolved at the same pace. Many titles and professional terms still rely on masculine forms, even when referring to women.

The report notes a growing demand from women to have the positions they occupy linguistically recognized through appropriate feminine forms. This demand is portrayed as part of a broader expectation for the language to reflect social realities more accurately. However, the Académie emphasizes that current linguistic usage remains unsettled. The available evidence, drawn from a limited corpus collected with the assistance of the *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France* (DGLFLF), indicates that usage is marked by variation, hesitation, and inconsistency.

There is, according to the Académie, no coherent or stabilized trend toward feminization across sectors or regions. Furthermore, many forms coexist chaotically: masculine nouns with feminine articles, attempts at morphological feminization, and fluctuating agreement patterns. Because of this lack of uniformity, existing dictionaries, including the Académie's own, are said to be unable to capture or codify these emerging practices.

The Académie restates its role as one of observation rather than prescription. It asserts that its dictionary reflects *bon usage* [proper usage] only once such usage has stabilized across the community. While acknowledging the possibility of integrating feminized forms into future editions, the institution signals that, at the time of writing, the state of usage did not yet warrant official codification.

Part II—The Method (La méthode)

The second part of the report describes the methodological approach adopted by the Académie française in addressing the issue of feminization. Faced with

the complexity and sensitivity of the topic, the Académie chose to establish a dedicated commission tasked with studying the evolution of linguistic usage concerning professional and official titles. This commission was chaired by Gabriel de Broglie and composed of several members of the Académie, as well as external linguistic and historical experts.

The commission held nine meetings and based its work on both internal deliberations and consultation of external sources, including specialized linguistic studies and examples of contemporary usage collected by the *Délégation générale à la langue française et aux langues de France* (DGLFLF). It also benefited from the expertise of Robert Martin and Olivier Soutet, specialists in historical French grammar and lexicology.

Importantly, the report specifies that the commission's mission was limited in scope: it was tasked with studying the feminization of *noms de personnes* [nouns referring to people]—that is, professional titles and functions—without challenging the fundamental rules of French grammar more broadly. The Académie emphasizes that the commission adopted a pragmatic rather than a dogmatic approach, aiming to respond to the realities of linguistic evolution without imposing artificial or theoretical reforms.

Moreover, the commission acknowledged the generational shift taking place: while previous generations of women often accepted masculine titles as a mark of professional equality, newer generations increasingly favor feminized forms that affirm gender identity. However, the Académie underlines that its recommendations are based not on prescriptive ideology but on observed and well-established linguistic practices.

Part III—Professional Titles (Les noms de métiers)

The third section of the report focuses on the feminization of professional titles, examining both historical developments and contemporary usage. The Académie acknowledges that there is no inherent grammatical barrier to feminizing job titles in French. On the contrary, the language has long exhibited feminine forms for professions, some of which date back to the Middle Ages—for instance, *chirurgienne* [female surgeon], *commandante* [female commander], and forms

ending in *-esse*, such as *mairesse* [female mayor] or *chanteresse* [female singer in a choir]. This process continued into the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, particularly as women entered new professions during and after the World Wars.

The report notes that many feminine forms are already well established and recorded in recent editions of the Académie's dictionary, particularly for manual or service-related professions historically associated with women. It confirms that the feminization of these roles has occurred 'naturally' over time and that their inclusion in the dictionary has followed accordingly. However, the Académie also points out that not all feminized forms have been accepted or stabilized; some fell into disuse (e.g., *peintresse* or *doctoresse*), while others remain contested.

A detailed discussion is devoted to morphological patterns of feminization, such as *-er/-ère*, *-ien/-ienne*, *-teur/-trice*, and *-eur/-euse*. Particular attention is given to the *-eur* suffix, where both *-euse* and *-eure* endings coexist or compete, depending on whether the noun is derived from a verb. The commission notes that this area remains linguistically dynamic and lacks a unified norm.

The Académie also addresses cases where feminization appears to be more problematic. Terms such as *écrivaine* [female writer], *cheffe* [female chief], and *autrice* [authoress] are discussed as examples where usage is growing but remains unsettled or disputed. In the case of *chef*, the report lists a variety of experimental or marginal forms (*cheffe*, *cheftaine*, *cheffesse*, *chève*), but concludes that none have clearly emerged as dominant.

The report observes that resistance to feminization tends to increase in proportion to the symbolic or hierarchical status of the title in question. Feminine forms are more readily accepted for roles of lower or intermediate status, while higher-ranking positions appear more resistant to change. Furthermore, the Académie notes that some women themselves prefer to retain masculine titles as a sign of professional legitimacy or personal choice.

In closing, the Académie reaffirms that it does not seek to impose standardized solutions. Instead, it recommends flexibility and attentiveness to the realities of usage, with an aim to accompany linguistic evolution rather than to prescribe it.

Part IV—Official Functions, Titles, and Ranks (Les noms de fonctions, titres et grades)

The fourth and final part of the report addresses the feminization of titles related to official functions, honorific titles, and hierarchical ranks. The Académie begins by affirming that, as with professional titles, language should reflect the evolving participation of women in domains from which they were historically excluded. However, it argues that the feminization of functions and ranks presents additional complexities that require cautious treatment.

The report distinguishes between the exercise of a profession, which is closely linked to individual skill and identity, and the holding of an official function, rank, or title, which is conceptualized as more abstract, impersonal, and independent of the officeholder's gender. Functions and ranks—particularly those in the public sector, diplomacy, or the military—are described as symbolic roles tied to the institutional structure itself, rather than to personal identity.

This distinction explains why feminization, although increasingly visible at the lexical level, remains less systematic in higher offices. The Académie emphasizes that functions at the top of the hierarchy, such as *ambassadeur* [ambassador] or *préfet* [prefect], historically resist feminization more strongly. In some cases, pre-existing feminine forms, such as *ambassadrice*, originally referred not to the female officeholder but to the wife of an ambassador, adding further complications to reform efforts.

The report also notes significant variation in practices across the Francophone world. Some countries, particularly in North America and parts of Europe, have embraced feminization more readily, while others remain conservative. This variability is cited as another reason for the Académie's recommendation of flexibility and case-by-case adaptation, rather than the imposition of rigid new norms.

Legal and administrative considerations are also raised. The Académie warns that premature or inconsistent feminization could lead to ambiguities or conflicts in legal documents and official designations. Therefore, it suggests that feminization must balance linguistic sensitivity with legal precision and institutional clarity.

Finally, the Académie concludes that, although the feminization of functions and ranks is progressing, it remains an uneven and evolving phenomenon. It recommends continued observation of usage and refrains from offering fixed prescriptions. Instead, it advocates an approach that respects both linguistic traditions and the ongoing transformations of French-speaking societies.

In sum, the 2019 report by the Académie française provides a comprehensive yet cautious overview of the evolving question of feminization in French. Structured across four sections, the document addresses the social context, outlines a pragmatic methodological approach, surveys the historical and morphological dimensions of professional titles, and discusses the complexities surrounding official functions and ranks. While acknowledging social change, the Académie consistently emphasizes prudence, flexibility, and deference to established usage, setting the tone for the discursive patterns analyzed in the following sections.

Data Selection

Given the qualitative nature of this research and the objective of uncovering discursive patterns, the entire report was examined through close reading. Relevant excerpts were systematically extracted based on their significance to institutional positioning, gender ideologies in language, and references to linguistic norms. French quotations are presented in their original form and are accompanied by English translations to ensure clarity and accessibility across linguistic audiences.

Analytical Framework

The analysis is grounded in CDA, particularly drawing on the works of Norman Fairclough (1989, 1995) and Teun van Dijk (1993), who view discourse as a form of social practice that both reflects and reproduces power relations. In addition, the study integrates insights from Feminist CDA (Lazar, 2005), which highlights how discourse constructs gender ideologies and reinforces male-dominant norms under the guise of neutrality.

The analytical focus is on three levels of discourse, following Fairclough's model:

- 1) Textual level: lexical choices, grammatical structures, and rhetorical strategies used in the document.
- 2) Discursive practice: how the Académie frames its role in language regulation and its engagement with public debates on feminization.
- 3) Social practice: the broader ideological implications concerning gender, authority, and language change in French society.

Each selected excerpt was coded according to the discourse strategy it employed (e.g., legitimation through tradition, hedging, neutral framing, anti-prescriptivism), its position within the CDA levels, and its underlying ideological function.

Limitations

While this qualitative research allows for an informed perspective, it also brings certain limitations. First, the analysis focuses solely on the Académie's official discourse without triangulation through interviews or alternative institutional voices. Second, although CDA allows for detailed qualitative interpretation, it remains subjective to some extent. Efforts were made to mitigate this by clearly defining coding categories and by anchoring interpretations in established CDA frameworks.

Rationale for Document-Based Approach

Choosing to analyze an institutional document rather than media texts or classroom materials aligns with the study's objective of uncovering how official discourse manages linguistic gender reform. The *Rapport* offers a particularly rich corpus, as it is authored by the institution most responsible for maintaining linguistic standards in French. Studying this document also allows the research to explore the tension between language ideology, public usage, and institutional authority in a controlled and well-bounded context.

Findings

The findings are organized according to Fairclough's (1995) three-dimensional model of Critical Discourse Analysis: textual, discursive, and sociocultural levels. Each level, though intercorrelated, offers a distinct lens through which to examine how the Académie française constructs its position on the feminization of professional and official titles. Taken together, these levels reveal a layered institutional discourse that operates through caution, detachment, and strategic preservation of normative hierarchies.

Textual Level

At the textual level, the report reveals a consistent reliance on linguistic strategies that foreground hesitation, neutrality, and conditionality. Modal verbs such as *semble* [seems], *peut* [may], and epistemic adverbs like *évidemment* [obviously] are frequently employed to hedge propositions, creating a rhetorical distance between the institution and the reform it discusses. Passive constructions and abstract nouns—such as *le bon usage* [proper usage], *le flottement* [fluctuation], and *la sanction de l'usage* [sanction of usage]—further remove the Académie from the site of agency. These choices frame feminization not as an institutional responsibility but as a phenomenon external to the Académie, subject to social validation before any formal recognition. In this way, the report constructs a tone of detached objectivity while reinforcing traditional linguistic boundaries (see Annex: Table 1).

Discursive Level

At the discursive level, the Académie française projects an image of institutional rationality and restraint. Rather than advocating any strong stance, the report delegates the matter to a commission, thus externalizing deliberation. It repeatedly emphasizes the commission's 'non-dogmatic' approach, its methodological grounding in usage observation, and the Académie's role as a guardian rather than a reformer. Phrases such as *la liberté de l'usage* [freedom of usage] and *il n'entre*

pas dans la mission de l'Académie... [it is not the Académie's role...] contribute to the construction of a discourse that appears neutral and consultative. Yet these same strategies also serve to minimize institutional accountability and deflect activist or ideological critiques. The institution's discursive self-framing, rooted in traditions of learned objectivity, masks its role in gatekeeping linguistic legitimacy (see Annex: Table 2).

Sociocultural Level

At the sociocultural level, the findings point to deeper patterns of symbolic power and gendered social stratification embedded in the Académie's stance. The report shows a clear distinction between how feminization is received in low-prestige versus high-prestige professions. Feminine forms like *infirmière* or *caissière* are treated as normalized, while titles such as *ambassadrice*, *autrice*, and *cheffe* are portrayed as unstable, marked, or even problematic. This pattern reveals an implicit hierarchy of linguistic legitimacy that aligns with societal prestige where masculine forms continue to dominate at the top of the institutional order. Moreover, the report frequently references legal constraints, symbolic ambiguities, and cross-national variation to justify its cautious stance. Such references not only reinforce the perception of feminization as an ongoing societal debate but also reposition the Académie as a passive observer rather than an active agent of change (see Annex: Table 3).

Discussion

This study set out to investigate how the Académie française constructs its institutional discourse on the feminization of professional and official titles. Through a critical discourse analysis grounded in Fairclough's (1995) tri-level model—textual, discursive, and sociocultural—the paper reveals how language operates not merely as a medium of representation, but as a strategic resource for institutional self-management. The findings confirm both hypotheses: first, that specific linguistic strategies are used to project neutrality while safeguarding

masculine-centric norms; and second, that the Académie's discourse delays or deflects feminist linguistic reforms through calculated discursive leadership.

At the textual level, the Académie relies heavily on hedging, modality, and lexical distancing to manage its stance. Modal verbs like *semble* [seems] and *peut* [may], alongside epistemic adverbs such as *évidemment* [obviously], allow the institution to present its commentary as cautious observation rather than intervention. Passive constructions and abstract formulations—*le bon usage* [proper usage], *la sanction de l'usage* [sanction of usage]—function to obscure agency. Such linguistic choices create an aura of descriptive neutrality, but as Fairclough (1995) argues, these rhetorical strategies often mask ideological investments. Here, neutrality becomes a managerial act: the institution governs its authority not through explicit imposition but through discursive restraint. By invoking *naturellement* [naturally] to explain why masculine forms persist, the Académie disavows its historical role in institutionalizing gender asymmetries. As Viennot (2014) notes, the so-called “natural” evolution of French has entailed repeated acts of symbolic exclusion of feminine forms. Thus, the Académie's textual strategies serve not merely to describe change, but to manage its tempo and direction.

At the discursive level, the Académie presents itself as a methodical, apolitical body committed to tradition and observation. It delegates responsibility for addressing feminization to a commission—described as non-dogmatic and empirically grounded—which permits the institution to distance itself from ideological engagement. This rhetorical maneuver exemplifies what Lazar (2005) terms a “feminist CDA” problem: feminist or activist positions are routinely reframed as emotionally driven or politically extreme, while conservative institutions position themselves as neutral stewards of common sense. The invocation of *la liberté de l'usage* [freedom of usage] similarly functions as an ideological alibi. Though presented as democratic, it defers responsibility to the public while reserving the Académie's power to determine when usage becomes “stable” enough for institutional recognition.

These moves reveal the Académie as a case study in discursive leadership. Rather than manage reform through policy or direct authority, it manages language ideologically—regulating change through a discourse of institutional

caution, proceduralism, and symbolic legitimacy. As Candau (2024) notes, such technical discourse creates buffers that delay politically sensitive transformation. In this sense, the Académie's report exemplifies how organizations can perform symbolic governance—managing public expectations, preserving institutional prestige, and regulating dissent—all through discourse. This style of leadership is highly relevant to organizational studies: it illustrates how institutions negotiate evolving norms not by overt resistance but by crafting a carefully hedged communicative identity that preserves continuity under the guise of consultation.

At the sociocultural level, the analysis reveals how symbolic hierarchies are preserved through controlled openness. Feminization is accepted for roles historically associated with women or of lower symbolic capital (*infirmière* [nurse], *secrétaire* [secretary]) but becomes contentious when applied to prestigious or authoritative titles (*ambassadeur* [ambassador], *chef* [chief]). This pattern of selective resistance indicates that linguistic conservatism is less about grammatical constraints than about safeguarding masculine-coded domains of power. As Motschenbacher (2018) and Boutron & Weber (2022) argue, language functions as a site of symbolic struggle; institutional discomfort with feminizing leadership titles stems from the threat such changes pose to entrenched symbolic capital.

Moreover, the Académie repeatedly invokes legal precision and international variation to justify its reluctance. It warns against premature reforms that could destabilize legal documents or institutional clarity. These references serve to rationalize inaction and construct linguistic inclusivity as a threat to administrative coherence. As Loison et al. (2020) observe, legal discourse often functions as a gatekeeping mechanism—masking inequality as procedural caution. In doing so, the Académie effectively neutralizes feminist reform not by outright rejection, but by enveloping it in discourse that privileges legalism, tradition, and stability.

Three cross-level discursive patterns emerge from the analysis:

- 1) Cautious distancing: The Académie consistently avoids direct reform initiatives, instead positioning itself as a passive observer of social evolution. Through modality, delegation, and appeals to future consensus,

it shifts responsibility onto public usage while retaining authority to arbitrate linguistic legitimacy.

- 2) Symbolic boundary maintenance: Feminization is permitted only when it does not challenge domains linked to institutional prestige. The boundaries of acceptable change are drawn to protect masculine-coded titles from redefinition, revealing the depth of gendered symbolic stratification.
- 3) Delegitimization of activist discourse: Feminist proposals are framed as linguistically unstable or ideologically excessive. This rhetorical maneuver casts reform as socially premature and linguistically incoherent, while the Académie's own conservatism is positioned as impartial expertise.

These patterns illustrate how institutional language becomes a tool of symbolic management. The Académie's report does not merely reflect grammatical change—it actively polices the boundaries of linguistic and social legitimacy. Its strategic communication reveals how institutions shape public narratives, protect traditional hierarchies, and slow disruptive change—all while appearing neutral and democratic. In this way, the report embodies the very theme of the special issue: it demonstrates why language in management matters.

Ultimately, the Académie's discourse reflects not just a philosophy of language, but a politics of leadership. It manages reform not by enacting it, but by staging it—controlling when and how language change becomes admissible. Such discursive leadership highlights the central role of language in institutional governance, identity formation, and equality policy. If, as this issue contends, language is a tool of management, then the Académie's carefully crafted neutrality is one of its most enduring instruments of control.

Conclusion

This study has demonstrated that the Académie française's report on feminization functions not merely as a linguistic commentary but as an act of symbolic and discursive management. Through rhetorical strategies of cautious distancing, boundary maintenance, and discursive deferral, the institution consolidates its

authority while managing reform in ways that protect masculine-coded norms. The discourse it deploys is not neutral; it is a calculated exercise in institutional leadership through language.

The Académie performs what this article identifies as discursive leadership: it preserves legitimacy, steers public perception, and contains ideological disruption without overtly opposing change. Feminization is permitted only where it does not challenge institutional prestige. Where symbolic power is at stake—especially in elite titles—reform is delayed, reframed, or rhetorically undermined. This management of inclusion is deeply consequential, as it affects whose identities are officially recognized and how equality is operationalized within linguistic systems.

By framing language reform as contingent on “stabilized usage” or legal clarity, the Académie regulates not only how language changes, but when and under what conditions it may do so. In doing so, it exemplifies how institutions use language to manage authority, identity, and continuity under the guise of technical neutrality.

Future research should investigate how other institutional actors—such as ministries, corporate HR departments, or educational policy bodies—navigate inclusive language norms. Comparative studies across sectors and Francophone regions could enrich our understanding of how symbolic governance unfolds differently across organizational landscapes. Such inquiries would further reveal the broader implications of linguistic feminization as a question of management—of meaning, legitimacy, and social belonging.

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Annex

Table 1. CDA Analysis–Textual Level

Quotation (French)	Gloss (English)	Linguistic Feature(s)
Une attente [...] de femmes [...] combler ce qu'elles ressentent comme une lacune de la langue	An expectation from a growing number of women... who wish to fill what they feel is a gap in the language	Epistemic verb (<i>ressentent</i>) indicating subjectivity
Des usages qui restent hésitantes et incertaines	Usages that remain hesitant and uncertain	Adjectival hedging (<i>hésitantes, incertaines</i>)
Le grand flottement que l'on constate entre les usages existants	the great fluctuation observed between existing usages	Abstract noun (<i>flottement</i>)
'Cheffe' semble avoir la faveur de l'usage	'Cheffe' seems to be favored in usage	Modal verb (<i>semble</i>) indicating uncertainty
Ces mots sont entrés naturellement dans l'usage	These words have naturally entered usage	Adverb (<i>naturellement</i>) implying passive evolution
Presque toutes [...] possèdent déjà un féminin reconnu	Almost all titles already have a recognized feminine form	Passive adjective (<i>reconnu</i>)
Il n'est évidemment pas question de modifier [...] les usages existants	It is obviously not a matter of modifying existing usages	Negation structure + epistemic adverb (<i>évidemment</i>)
Deux formes de féminisation des noms en '-eur' semblent entrer en compétition	Two feminized forms of nouns ending in '-eur' seem to be in competition	Modal verb (<i>semblent</i>)
L'Académie [...] enregistrera [...] les formes [...] après la sanction de l'usage	The Académie will record the forms only after they are sanctioned by usage	Future tense verb + nominal abstraction (<i>sanction</i>)

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Table 2. CDA Analysis—Discursive Level

Quotation (French)	Gloss (English)	Discursive Strategies
La commission a estimé qu'elle devait s'abstenir de toute position dogmatique	The commission considered it should refrain from any dogmatic position	Framing neutrality
L'objet même de sa mission [...] excluait par conséquent toute velléité de remettre en cause les règles générales	The very subject of its mission excluded any intent to question the general rules	Institutional boundary-setting
L'Académie [...] enregistrera [...] les formes [...] après la sanction de l'usage	The Académie will record the forms only after they are sanctioned by usage	Deference to external authority
La commission [...] a toujours fondé ses recommandations sur le «bon usage» dont elle est la gardienne	The commission has always based its recommendations on the 'proper usage' of which it is the guardian	Self-legitimation through tradition
L'Académie [...] refuse toute tentative pour forcer l'usage	The Académie refuses any attempt to force usage	Anti-prescriptivist distancing
L'Académie [...] en appelle à la liberté de l'usage [...] certaines femmes souhaitent conserver les appellations masculines	The Académie appeals to freedom of usage ... some women prefer to keep masculine titles	Invocation of individual choice to justify non-intervention
Elle a décidé de confier à une commission l'étude de l'évolution de l'usage	It decided to entrust a commission with the study of usage evolution	Delegation of responsibility
La commission a fait le choix de ne pas méconnaître les difficultés pratiques [...] en vue d'indiquer les voies [...] d'une évolution harmonieuse	The commission chose not to ignore the practical difficulties... to suggest paths for a harmonious evolution	Pragmatic framing of cautious change

Quotation (French)	Gloss (English)	Discursive Strategies
La féminisation des noms de métiers... soulève diverses questions...	The feminization of job titles raises various questions...	Framing the issue as complex and unresolved
Il n'existe aucun obstacle de principe à la féminisation...	There is no principle-based obstacle to feminization...	Strategic minimization of institutional resistance
Mais l'usage est une réalité complexe...	But usage is a complex reality...	Framing linguistic change as difficult to systematize
Il n'est pas question de modifier les usages existants...	It is not a matter of modifying existing usages...	Defensive stance through negation
Il n'entre pas dans la mission de l'Académie d'anticiper sur les évolutions...	It is not the Académie's role to anticipate linguistic evolution...	Institutional role distancing
La langue féminise faiblement les noms au sommet de l'échelle sociale...	The language weakly feminizes titles at the top of the social hierarchy...	Highlighting symbolic boundaries of prestige
La forme 'agente' commence à s'implanter mais rencontre une résistance...	The form 'agente' is beginning to take hold but faces resistance...	Acknowledgment of social conflict
La féminisation est particulièrement répandue dans les métiers exercés par les femmes...	Feminization is particularly widespread in jobs commonly held by women...	Normalization of feminization in non-prestigious roles

Source: Author's own elaboration.

Table 3. CDA Analysis—Sociocultural Level

Quotation (French)	Gloss (English)	Sociocultural framing
La langue doit transcrire fidèlement l'exercice par les femmes des fonctions... auxquelles [...] elles n'ont pas eu accès.	Language must faithfully reflect women's access to roles they were long excluded from.	Moral legitimation of reform grounded in social equity
L'imposition de schémas théoriques ou l'édiction de normes abstraites s'avèrent [...] inopérantes.	The imposition of theoretical models or abstract norms proves ineffective.	Delegitimation of top-down reform through anti-ideological stance
Aucune contrainte imposée au langage ne suffirait à changer les pratiques sociales.	No constraint imposed on language can change social practices.	Deterministic displacement of agency from language to society
Il est indéniable que la langue a [...] marqué une certaine réserve à féminiser les appellations [...] des fonctions supérieures...	It is undeniable that the language has shown some reserve in feminizing titles linked to higher-level functions...	Indexing linguistic resistance to symbolic power structures
Il convient d'observer [...] la grande variété des usages ayant cours dans les pays francophones...	It is important to observe the wide variety of usage in Francophone countries...	Relativization of linguistic norms through international comparison
Les seules ambiguïtés qui subsistent sont limitées à une sphère sociale très étroite [...] et sont sans doute transitoires...	The remaining ambiguities are limited to a very narrow social sphere and are likely temporary...	Minimization of ongoing sociolinguistic tensions
Il convient en outre d'évaluer les conséquences juridiques de la féminisation...	It is also necessary to assess the legal consequences of feminization...	Linking language reform to institutional/legal constraints
La langue féminise faiblement ou pas les noms des métiers [...] au sommet de l'échelle sociale.	The language weakly feminizes or does not feminize job titles at the top of the social hierarchy.	Correlation of linguistic gender with prestige and hierarchy
Certaines femmes souhaitent conserver les appellations masculines...	Some women wish to keep masculine titles...	Reframing feminist reform as a matter of individual preference

Quotation (French)	Gloss (English)	Sociocultural framing
Le Dictionnaire... a pour vocation... de dire le bon usage dès lors qu'il est établi et consacré.	The Dictionary's role is to reflect proper usage once it is established and consecrated.	Institutional authority as conservative guardian of norms
'Cheffe' semble avoir la faveur de l'usage...	' <i>Cheffe</i> ' seems to be favored in usage...	Tentative recognition of female leadership terms in public discourse
Deux formes de féminisation des noms en '-eur' semblent entrer en compétition...	Two feminized forms of nouns ending in '-eur' seem to be in competition...	Unresolved linguistic variation reflecting contested gender norms
La forme 'écrivaine' se répand dans l'usage sans pour autant s'imposer.	The form ' <i>écrivaine</i> ' is spreading in usage without yet becoming established.	Ambivalence toward female-authored identity in literary domain
Les formes féminines en '-esse' [...] sont en train de disparaître [...] car elles constituent une marque jugée excessive...	Feminine forms ending in '-esse' are disappearing because they are seen as excessive marks of gender.	Rejection of older feminized forms as ideologically marked
Ces mots sont entrés naturellement dans l'usage et l'Académie les a enregistrés...	These words have naturally entered usage and the Académie has recorded them.	Institutional passivity in response to external social change

Source: Author's own elaboration.