

Media reception of the gender-neutral pronoun *iel* in the French and Dutch language presses of Belgium

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1. Introduction

In the fall of 2021, a language controversy erupted in France over a gender-neutral neologism: the pronoun *iel* ('they'). The matter was widely reported on outside of France, and also caught the attention of the Belgian press, both in Wallonia and Flanders. This paper discusses the Belgian reaction to the controversy and the ongoing language debate in France. In that country, two main camps dispute the right to set a new direction for the grammar of the French language: on the one hand, feminist linguists, such as Éliane Viennot (2017), criticize the male-centredness of French grammar, and can count on the support of non-binary linguists, such as Alpheratz (2018), who are rewriting the language's sacrosanct grammar predicated on two grammatical genders with the aim to make it gender-neutral and inclusive, while on the other, linguists and intellectuals, such as Charaudeau (2018) and Rastier (2020), offer more traditional assessments of the language's fundamental nature. Wallonia is very much part of the Francosphere and inevitably concerned by the debate given that French is also its official language. Flanders, though officially Dutch speaking, is also not indifferent.

2. Much ado about *iel*

The inclusion of the gender-neutral pronoun *iel* ('they') in the online version of the leading French dictionary, *Le Robert*, led to much controversy and debate in the French press in the days and weeks following its appearance in the *Dico en ligne* ('online dictionary') in the fall of 2021. French politicians, such as François Jolivet, a member of president Macron's centrist party *La République en marche!* ('The Republic on the move'),¹ joined the debate by accusing Charles Bimbenet, managing director of *Le Robert*, and his team of lexicographers, in a much-

¹ In May 2022, Macron changed the name of the party he founded in 2016 to *Renaissance*.

publicized tweet, of promoting a cause that is foreign to French culture: “*le wokisme*” (‘wokeism’). The accusation immediately received strong support from France’s Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer, who tweeted in response that “*l’écriture inclusive n’est pas l’avenir de la langue française*” (‘inclusive writing is not the future of the French language’). Many other politicians, public figures, and intellectuals, on either side of the debate, also spoke out, including Brigitte Macron, France’s first lady, who commented briefly, “*il y a deux pronoms : il et elle,*” (‘there are two pronouns: he and she’) to which she added “*la langue est si belle et deux pronoms c’est bien*” (‘the language is so beautiful, and two pronouns suffice’) (Le Monde en ligne, 2021).

As for the offending dictionary entry (accessible at <https://dictionnaire.lerobert.com/definition/iel>), it is rather short. It defines *iel* as a “*pronom personnel sujet de la troisième personne du singulier (iel) et du pluriel (iels), employé pour évoquer une personne quel que soit son genre*” (‘subject pronoun of the third person singular (iel) or plural (iels), used to refer to a person regardless of gender’). A usage label, “*rare,*” (‘rare’) precedes the definition, which is followed by two sample sentences: “*iel se définit comme non binaire*” (‘They self-identify as non-binary’), and “*Les stagiaires ont reçu les documents qu’iels doivent signer*” (‘The interns have received the documents they need to sign’).²

While the entry itself sparked fierce debate in politically conservative circles in France, the usage label also came under attack from lexicologists and lexicographers who felt that *iel*’s frequency of use and dispersion in France and in the wider Francophonie was too insignificant to warrant its inclusion in the dictionary. In an interview with the Quebec newspaper, *Le Devoir*, linguist Nadine Vincent, for instance, stated that “*le travail d’un dictionnaire, c’est de nommer ce qui existe plutôt que de nommer pour faire exister*” (‘the aim of a dictionary is to name what exists and not to name so as to allow something to exist’), adding that “*ce n’est pas à un dictionnaire d’être le premier sur la ligne de front*” (‘it is not the role of a dictionary to be first on the front line’) (Lalonde 2021). Charles Bimbenet retorted to the political and linguistic accusations levelled at his address that *Le Robert* had observed a steady increase in the use of the controversial pronoun in recent months, and perhaps more importantly that it was *Le Robert*’s mission to observe and describe the evolution of the French language as it unfolds.

² The dictionary entry has undergone a few revisions since its first appearance. For instance, the entry, accessed in May 2022, no longer contains the much-criticized observation that *iel* can be declined as *ielle* in the feminine singular and *ielles* in the feminine plural, “*REM. ON ÉCRIT AUSSI ielle, ielles,*” a comment that seemingly contradicted the pronoun’s gender-neutral status. The original sample sentence, “*L’usage du pronom iel dans la communication inclusive*” (‘The use of the pronoun *iel* in inclusive communication’), criticized because it did not truly illustrate how to use *iel* as a gender-neutral pronoun in a sentence, has been replaced by two new sample sentences that do.

Widely reported in France's national press, the controversy also drew the attention of the international press, and notably of the Belgian media based in a country that shares with France not only a border but also an official language, for which it uses the same reference works, including significantly the now controversial *Petit Robert*. It has been argued (see, for example, Coady 2020; Loison, Perrier & Noûs 2020) that the debate surrounding gender-neutral and inclusive language is not specific to France – and indeed many countries today are grappling with issues related to language, diversity, and inclusion –, but that the level of opposition to gender-neutral and inclusive innovations, ranging from neologisms to new writing conventions, is much higher there than elsewhere in the Western world, including in the Francophonie. Explanations for this have been suggested. Coady (2020), for instance, claims that France's resistance stems from at least two dominant ideologies in the areas of language, culture, and identity: firstly, a purist attitude towards language, which requires full adherence to standardized norms, is unaccepting of language errors and grammatical deviations, and is preoccupied with eloquence and clarity, and, secondly, a strong belief that this single uniform language is the main identity marker holding the inhabitants of the state together. Both ideologies are firmly rooted in the 17th and 18th centuries, and form with the principle of universalism, exemplified by the slogan *liberté, égalité, fraternité* ('freedom, equality, fraternity'), the ideological foundation of modern-day France, which gradually emerged after the Revolution of 1789.

Against this background, this paper focuses on the media reception of *iel* in the printed press not of France but of neighbouring Belgium, where French is also an official language, though not the sole official language, and hence does not perform the role of 'main identity marker holding the inhabitants of the state together.' Indeed, Belgium's two main official languages, French and Dutch, are embroiled in a protracted social conflict since the country's independence. They share, this conflict notwithstanding, a common sociolinguistic status: they are both lesser valued regional varieties of languages that are dominant in nation-states that fit the mould 'one nation-one language', are expected to conform to the normative dictionaries and grammars of these higher valued national languages, but are also influenced by the linguistically and culturally diverse context, combining Gallic and Germanic traits, in which they evolve. This paper, then, analyzes media coverage of the controversy surrounding *iel* in the French and Dutch language presses of Belgium with the aim to assess how both communities negotiate stance and position themselves with respect to gender-neutral language. It uses to that effect a combined quantitative and qualitative approach.

3. Method and corpus

The method chosen is informed by two leading theories in media discourse analysis: agenda-setting theory and particularly framing theory. While agenda-setting focuses on the level of media attention given to an issue, framing concerns the ways in which issues given prominence in coverage are presented to the reading public. In other words, while agenda-setting, through a high level of media attention, tells the reader what to think about by emphasizing issues and pushing them to the forefront (McCombs & Shaw 1972; McCombs 2005), framing signals to the reader how to think about an issue by “selecting and highlighting some facets [...] and making connections among them so as to promote a particular interpretation [or] evaluation” (Entman 2004, 5).

Using this combined quantitative (agenda-setting) and qualitative (framing) methodology, the approach of the paper is three-pronged. The paper sets out, firstly, to gauge to what extent the French language and Dutch language presses of Belgium considered the *iel*-controversy newsworthy enough to put it on their readers’ agenda. Secondly, it seeks to determine to what extent both presses adopted a stance that did or did not distance itself from that found in France’s national press. Thirdly, the paper assesses agenda-setting and framing differences between Belgium’s two main national presses to further interpret their reception of France’s heated debate about gender-neutral language. It is assumed that these differences provide information about the ways in which the two language communities are positioning themselves with respect to gender-neutral and inclusive language use within their own borders. Newspapers analyzed will be leading Belgian papers: six French-language dailies on the one hand, *La Libre Belgique*, *Le Soir*, *La Dernière Heure*, *La Capitale*, *L’Écho*, and *L’Avenir*, and six Dutch-language dailies on the other, *De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, *De Gazet van Antwerpen*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, and *Het Belang van Limburg*.

To assess agenda-setting, the author quantified over a period of one month the number of items, including news stories and op eds, that appeared in the various newspapers. The period under review begins on November 16, 2021, the day of François Jolivet’s controversial tweet which triggered much of the debate, and ends a month later, on December 16, 2021. The end date necessarily reflects the need to delimit the period under review but does not exclude that the discussion continued afterwards. It does, however, offer an appropriate timeline to draw conclusions concerning trends in agenda-setting and framing in the Belgian press.

With respect to framing, it should be noted that frames, or narratives regarding an issue given salience in the press, tend to be supplied to journalists by elite stakeholders – government sources and the wider political elite, public intellectuals, social activists, and so on – who court the media so that they transfer the supplied frames to the reading public in turn. Frame activation and spread thus involve three types of actors organized into a cascading hierarchy: (1) networks of elite sources and frame sponsors, (2) journalists and news organizations, and finally (3) the reading public. Obviously, the media have agency within this system, aptly captured by Entman’s (2004) *cascade model* of frame activation and spread, and can adopt, for a given issue, the narrative or frame supplied to them by elite actors, modify or counter it, or simply ignore it. In any case, the public receives the narrative or frame as processed by the media, and uses it, combined with their own personal cognitive schemata, to develop an understanding of the reported-on event.

In the case of the matter at the heart of this paper, the inclusion in the *Robert en ligne* (‘Robert online dictionary’) of the gender-neutral pronoun *iel*, elite stakeholders, such as French politicians and public figures, linguists, intellectuals, and social activists, provided frames which were echoed by the national press. *Le Figaro*, *Le Monde*, *Libération*, and *L’Humanité*, for instance, all leading newspapers in France, reported at length on the event, transferring frames and narratives received from political and intellectual quarters to their readers, the latter counting amongst them also foreign journalists from neighbouring countries. Consequently, frame spread continued beyond France’s national boundaries, to Belgium for example, which shares linguistic and to some extent cultural ties with its neighbour.

To assess framing trends regarding *iel* in the Belgian press (French and Dutch) over the month under review (November 16, 2021 – December 16, 2021), the author tracked the presence of frames that originated in France and sought to determine whether these were accepted, and hence fully integrated into the Belgian press’s stance on gender-neutral and inclusive language, or on the contrary refuted.

The frames, tracked by the author in the Belgian press (French and Dutch), were first identified through a review of the French press, as well as political and academic sources. The author identified as many as twelve frames, characterizing the debate within France over *iel*, and inclusive or gender-neutral language more generally. Interestingly, these frames overlap considerably with those located over forty years ago by Blaubergs (1980) in American discourse regarding proposals for changing sexist language, aimed among other things at eliminating the usage of masculine terms, such as ‘man’ and the pronoun ‘he’, as generics. The twelve frames are listed below followed by a brief description, and relevant

quotes from elite sources.³ To underscore the overlap with Blaubergs' (1980) findings, the labels for frames 1 to 8 are based on the typology she proposed in her seminal article, *An analysis of classic arguments against changing sexist language*. The remaining four frames are specific to the French debate over *iel* and other French proposals for inclusive and gender-neutral language.

Frame 1 – Cross-cultural arguments

Cross-cultural arguments tend to state that there is no apparent link between the gender-neutral or inclusive nature of a language and the treatment of women and non-binary individuals by its speakers.

Frame 2 – Language is a trivial concern

This frame argues that social activists should focus on more urgent matters, or more pressing forms of sexism, such as gender discrimination in the workplace, equal pay for women, etc.

Frame 3 – Threat to freedom of speech

This argument tends to be used by those who oppose guidelines for gender-neutral or inclusive writing. French politician and essayist Lydia Guirous (Cini 2021) for instance, equates gender-neutral initiatives in the arena of language use with “*une tyrannie des minorités qui veulent imposer à toute la société des choses [...] inutiles*” (‘a tyranny of minorities who are seeking to impose on society as a whole useless [...] things’).

Frame 4 – Masculine generics are not sexist

As the label suggests, this frame aims to demonstrate that masculine generics are not necessarily gender exclusive. Interestingly, it can also be found in the writings of more moderate supporters of inclusive language, such as Belgian linguists Anne Dister and Marie-Louise Moreau (2020). The authors of *Inclure sans exclure. Les bonnes pratiques de rédaction inclusive* (‘Inclusion without exclusion. Best practices for inclusive writing’), the official guideline for inclusive writing adopted by the *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* (‘Federation Wallonia-Brussels’),⁴ argue, for instance, that masculine forms can be both exclusive (i.e., refer to male referents only) and inclusive (i.e., refer to male, female, and non-binary referents) in the French language. They explain that “*le mécanisme mis en œuvre dans le masculin de Les voyageurs sont priés de... s’inscrit [...] dans un principe général du*

³ In a forthcoming article, the author plans to provide a more detailed and contextualized analysis of the twelve frames.

⁴ Belgium is comprised of three federated entities: the French-dominant *Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles* (‘Federation Wallonia-Brussels’), Dutch-dominant *Vlaamse Gemeenschap* (‘Flemish Community’), and the German-dominant *Ostbelgien* (‘East Belgium’).

fonctionnement des langues : dans la désignation d'ensembles mixtes, les formes masculines comme voyageurs rompent leur association avec la valeur de « mâle », pour renvoyer tant à des femmes qu'à des hommes"⁵ (Dister & Moreau 2020, 17).

Frame 5 – Etymological arguments

This set of arguments exploits etymological facts, part of a language's diachronic dimension, to counter claims put forward by proponents of gender-neutral or inclusive language. The frame disregards, to a certain extent, the dominant role of synchronic knowledge in language use, most speakers of a language having little or no knowledge of their language's development and evolution through time.

Frame 6 – Language change is difficult

This frame makes the argument that languages evolve slowly. Grammatical changes, in particular, can be laborious and may take considerable time to complete. They may, moreover, result in additional changes elsewhere in the system of the language. Lexical changes, by contrast, such as the introduction into the language of a new word, occur frequently and easily. Despite appearances, the gender-neutral pronoun *iel* falls into the category not of a lexical but of a grammatical change, as deictics are grammatical and not lexical words.

Frame 7 – Threat to historical or cultural authenticity

French politicians, such as François Jolivet, but also the *Académie française* ('French Academy'), whose primary role it is to regulate the French language, have invoked this frame, which poses that gender-neutral or inclusive language distorts not only the French language but also threatens the authenticity of France's culture and values.⁶

Frame 8 – Appeal to authority

A now almost classic example of the appeal to authority is the letter⁷ sent to the *Académie française* ('French Academy') by French politician François Jolivet in

⁵ The mechanism at play in the masculine of *Les voyageurs sont priés de ...* ('Travellers are requested to ...') is part of a general principle underlying the functioning of language: when referring to a mixt group, masculine forms such as *voyageurs* drop the value 'male' so that they can refer to women as well as men.

⁶ In its 2017 declaration regarding gender-inclusive writing, the *Académie* ('Academy') famously stated that "*devant cette aberration « inclusive », la langue française se trouve désormais en peril mortel*" ('thus, because of this "inclusive" aberration, the French language finds itself in mortal danger'), while Jolivet, in his 2021 letter to the same *Académie*, expressed the fear that *iel* and similar innovations rooted in "*wokisme*" ('wokeism') might lead to the destruction of "*les valeurs qui sont les nôtres*" ('our values').

⁷ Jolivet shared the letter with the French public on his twitter account: François Jolivet on Twitter: "Le Petit Robert, dictionnaire que l'on pensait être une référence, vient d'intégrer sur son site les

which he asked the venerable institution to settle the matter of *iel*'s inclusion in *Le Robert en ligne* ('Robert online dictionary').

Frame 9 – Proponents lack grammatical knowledge

A charge sometimes leveled at the proponents of inclusive and gender-neutral language is that they lack a good understanding of French grammar and spelling (or worse, deliberately set out to violate the language's system).

Frame 10 – Foreign influence

The best-known version of this frame, often invoked by French politicians, is that France is under attack from an American ideology, pejoratively called "*le wokisme*" ('wokeism'), which is spreading racial and gender discord in a country that since the Enlightenment and the Revolution of 1789 adheres to the fundamental value of universalism, captured by the famous slogan: *liberté, égalité, fraternité* ('freedom, equality, fraternity'). The French republic must exhibit these virtues and cannot, as a consequence, discriminate based on culture, race, religion, ethnicity, sex, or gender. In his letter to the *Académie* ('Academy'), for instance, Jolivet levels the following accusation at the authors of *Le Robert*: "*Ses auteurs sont donc les militants d'une cause qui n'a rien de français: le wokisme*" ('The dictionary's authors, then, are activists for a cause that is foreign to France: wokeism').

Frame 11 – Inclusive language may exclude

Frame 11 contends that newly proposed writing conventions aimed at making women and non-binary people more visible in language can unintentionally negatively impact or exclude other vulnerable groups or minorities. French Minister of Education, Jean-Michel Blanquer (2021), invoked this frame in a *circulaire* ('circular') published in *Le Bulletin officiel* ('France's official bulletin') in which he forbade the teaching of inclusive writing, particularly the use of the *point médian* ('middle dot') as in *adolescent.e.s*, in France's schools, arguing that it could reduce literacy levels in school children, and significantly impede language development in children with learning difficulties. Dister and Moreau (2020) include this frame in the title of their guide for inclusive writing, *Inclure sans exclure* ('Inclusion without exclusion') and identify other vulnerable groups that may be negatively impacted, particularly the visually impaired who rely on text-to-speech software, which currently cannot vocalize character chains containing the *point médian* ('middle dot').

mots « iel, ielle, iels, ielles ». Ses auteurs sont donc les militants d'une cause qui n'a rien de Français : le #wokisme. J'ai écrit à l'Académie française. #LePetitRobert <https://t.co/ixFIP7s0It> / Twitter.

Frame 12 – *Esthetic arguments*

The twelfth and final frame alleges that the newly proposed writing conventions and neologisms render the French language less beautiful, unravel its grammatical structure, and make French texts illegible.

The author will now present the findings for the Belgian press, beginning with the agenda-setting data, followed by the framing data, for both the French language and Dutch language presses.

4. Agenda-setting data⁸

The inclusion of *iel* in the online version of *Le Robert* generated much discussion in France's printed press, especially following Jolivet's now infamous November 16th tweet regarding a letter he had sent to the *Académie française* ('French Academy') for advice and guidance on the matter, which he construed as an ideological intrusion threatening the French language and its international reputation. At the height of the controversy, from November 16 to December 16, 2021, *Le Figaro*, a centre-right paper, dedicated 18 articles to *iel*, described as an artificial pronoun ("*pronom factice*") (Rouart 2021), while left-leaning *Le Monde*, and leftist *Libération*, published 5 and 8 related articles respectively. With articles appearing on average every 1.6 days (*Le Figaro*), every 6 days (*Le Monde*), or 3.7 days (*Libération*), the French reading public would have been well aware of the controversy sparked by *Le Robert's* decision to confirm *iel's* existence and increased usage in the French language.

Below the numbers for the Belgian press for the same 30-day period. We present the numbers for the French-language press first, as their readership is most concerned by the debate surrounding *iel*, followed by those for the Dutch-language press, whose readership is admittedly further removed from the controversy, but is faced with similar developments in Dutch, where *die* and *hen* ('they') currently compete to become the language's new gender-neutral pronoun, and have indeed already been included with that mention in the Dutch-language equivalent of *Le Petit Robert*, the *Van Dale* dictionary.

4.1 French-language corpus

During the period under review, from November 16, 2021, to December 16, 2021, only 3 relevant articles appeared in the selected Belgian French-language newspapers. In at least one newspaper, namely *Le Soir*, reporting on *iel* continued throughout the month of December, with two more fairly short pieces appearing on December 23 (364 words) and December 29 (189 words). These were not

⁸ The data included in this section were obtained using the database Eureka.

included in the analysis, however, as they were published outside of the period under review.

The three articles appeared in three different newspapers: *La Libre Belgique*, *Le Soir*, and *L’Avenir*. The three remaining newspapers included in the corpus, *La Dernière Heure*, *La Capitale*, and *L’Écho*, seemingly did not consider the controversy that was keeping France captive newsworthy enough to dedicate space to it.

The rather meagre coverage – 1 article in 30 days in 3 different outlets – indicates that the Belgian French-language press made little or no attempt to put the matter on the reading public’s agenda.

Newspaper	Number of articles	Word-Count
<i>La Libre Belgique</i>	1	1,153
<i>Le Soir</i>	1	569
<i>La Dernière Heure</i>	0	-
<i>La Capitale</i>	0	-
<i>L’Écho</i>	0	-
<i>L’Avenir</i>	1	383
Totals	3	2,105

Table 1: Agenda-setting data – Belgian French-language press.

4.2 Dutch-language corpus

The coverage in Belgium’s Dutch-language press, by contrast, was a tad more intense: a total of 10 articles for all six newspapers, all concentrated in the immediate aftermath of Jolivet’s controversial tweet. About three times more than in Wallonia, with all six newspapers of the corpus dedicating at least one article to the subject, but the total coverage still pales in comparison to that in neighbouring France, where *Le Figaro* offered a total of 18 pieces over the same one-month period and *Libération* 8. It can be said, nevertheless, that the attentive Flemish public would have been alerted to the controversy, particularly the readership of the leading Flemish daily, *De Standaard*, which published the highest number of articles of all the Belgian dailies, French and Dutch language combined, over the period under review, namely 3. The total wordcount of the coverage provided by *De Standaard* (2,183 words) is, moreover, higher, by 78 words, than

the total wordcount of the coverage in Belgium’s French-language press (2,105 words).

Newspaper	Number of articles	Word-Count
<i>De Standaard</i>	3	2,183
<i>De Morgen</i>	2	553
<i>De Gazet van Antwerpen</i>	1	700
<i>Het Laatste Nieuws</i>	1	838
<i>Het Nieuwsblad</i>	2	830
<i>Het Belang van Limburg</i>	1	453
Totals	10	5,557

Table 2: Agenda-setting data – Belgian Dutch-language press.

The numbers above signal that Belgium’s Dutch-language press seemingly considered the controversy surrounding non-sexist language sparked by the inclusion of *iel* in *Le Robert* as more deserving of media attention and analysis than their French-language colleagues.

5. Framing data

Let us now turn to the framing data. To verify how the Belgian press positioned itself with respect to the controversy unfolding in France, the author evaluated the tone and stance of the relevant articles which appeared in the Belgian press (French and Dutch) during the period under review, and identified and analyzed the frames transferred from neighbouring France (see section 3 above). Here as well, the data from the French-language corpus will be presented first, and then the Dutch-language data.

5.1 French-language corpus

Table 3 below concerns the general stance of Belgium’s French-language press with respect to the gender-neutral pronoun *iel* and gender-neutral or inclusive language in general. The table also identifies the analyzed articles’ dominant tone used to evoke the debate surrounding *iel* in neighbouring France. The analysis considered stylistic devices, such as word choice and word play, use of humour

and sarcasm, and use of visuals to emphasize or bring to the fore aspects of the news story.

<i>Stance -iel</i>	positive	neutral	negative
	2	1	
<i>Stance gender-neutral / inclusive language</i>	positive	neutral	negative
	2	1	
<i>Tone of article</i>	neutral	bemused	mocking
		2	3

Table 3: Framing data – General stance of Belgian French-language press.

None of the 3 relevant articles published during the period under review were overtly negative: 2 took a rather positive stand with respect to *iel* and other gender-neutral language initiatives, while 1 adopted a more neutral attitude. All the articles, however, contained stylistic devices to poke fun at the polemic, or to show that they were puzzled by the visceral nature of the debate raging in France.

Le Soir's article, for instance, is a case in point. It uses the expression “*avec fracas*” (‘with a loud thud’ / ‘with a bang’) in its headline to describe what has occurred: “*le pronom « iel » entre dans Le Robert avec fracas*” (‘the pronoun “iel” enters the online *Robert* with a bang’). The article’s text, featuring comments provided by Belgian linguist Laurence Rosier-Van Ooteghem of the *Université Libre de Bruxelles* (ULB) (a French-speaking research university in Brussels), then sides with *Le Robert*:

La décision du Robert, un symbole fort pour les personnes non binaires, a suscité des réactions négatives en France. [...] Derrière la décision du Robert, il y a une volonté politique d’inclusion, de non-discrimination. Après, c’est à chacun de se positionner.
(Declercq 2021, 9)⁹

⁹ The decision of *Le Robert*, a significant gesture for non-binary people, has led to a backlash in France. [...] The dictionary’s decision appears motivated by a political will to promote inclusion and fight discrimination. Now it is up to the language user to take a position.

Indeed, in the cited passage, “*un symbole fort pour les personnes non binaires*” (‘a significant gesture for non-binary people’) inserted immediately after “*la décision du Robert*” (‘the decision of *Le Robert*’) counters “*a suscité des réactions négatives en France*” (‘has led to a backlash in France’). The reader understands that France’s negative reaction will be viewed unfavourably, while *Le Robert*’s decision will be viewed in a positive light. The article ends, moreover, in a visual – a photo of Rosier-Van Ooteghem followed by the caption: “*La décision du dictionnaire français permet de légitimer des usages, mais n’oblige personne à utiliser ces mots*” (‘The French dictionary’s decision helps legitimate new language usages, but forces no one to use these words’) – which underscores the article’s main message. *Robert*’s position is commendable, the pronoun is legitimate, and freedom of speech is intact, contrary to what is alleged by *iel*’s opponents.

Another article, which appeared in *La Libre Belgique*, introduces the controversy as follows: “*la presse française se déchaîne ces derniers jours sur un tout petit mot de trois lettres à peine : un nouveau pronom, le « iel »*” (‘the French press is going wild these days over a rather short word composed of only three letters: a new pronoun, “*iel*” ’) (Halleux 2021). The sentence creates a telling contrast between the magnitude of the reaction in the French press, captured by “*se déchaîne*” (‘is going wild’), and the petiteness of the offending pronoun, “*un tout petit mot de trois lettres à peine*” (‘a rather short word composed of only three letters’).

L’Avenir, finally, uses a particularly catchy headline: “*On dit que « on » est un con. Et « iel » alors ?*” (‘Singular “they” causes dismay. So, what about “*iel*”?’) (*L’Avenir* 2021). By far the most sarcastic of all three, the article ends in the following lines, which can be summarized as ‘bad publicity is good publicity’:

Reste que... le tapage que le mot a fait, c’est de l’usage. C’est des occurrences par dizaines, par centaines. Qui justifient la prise en compte du mot. Le mot existe comme jamais, maintenant !
(*L’Avenir* 2021, 6)¹⁰

Table 4 below concerns framing of *iel* and gender-neutral language in Belgium’s French-language press during the period under review. It identifies the frames that percolated from France, and whether these were accepted or rejected.

¹⁰ But in the end... all the fuss about that word is in fact usage. Usage amounting to tens if not hundreds of new occurrences. That legitimate the inclusion of the word in the dictionary. The word now exists more than ever!

FRAME	Invoked	Not invoked	Accepted	Refuted
Frame 1 – Cross-cultural arguments		3		
Frame 2 – Language is a trivial concern		3		
Frame 3 – Threat to freedom of speech	2	1		2
Frame 4 – Masculine generics are <i>not</i> sexist		3		
Frame 5 – Etymological arguments		3		
Frame 6 – Language change is difficult	2	1	2	
Frame 7 – Threat to historical or cultural authenticity	2	1		2
Frame 8 – Appeal to authority	1	2		1
Frame 9 – Proponents lack grammatical knowledge		3		
Frame 10 – Foreign influence	1	2		1
Frame 11 – Inclusive language may exclude	1	2	1	
Frame 12 – Esthetic arguments		3		

Table 4: Framing data – Invoked, accepted, and refuted frames in Belgian French-language press.

Of the 12 frames circulating in France's printed press and used as narratives to frame the *iel*-controversy, 6 spread to the three articles which appeared in *Le Soir*, *La Libre Belgique*, and *L'Avenir*. The 6 frames in question are: Frame 3 – Threat to freedom of speech, Frame 6 – Language change is difficult, Frame 7 – Threat to historical and cultural authenticity, Frame 8 – Appeal to authority, Frame 10 – Foreign influence, and Frame 11 – Inclusive language may exclude. Frames 3, 6, and 7 appeared in 2 of the 3 articles, while Frames 8, 10, and 11 were invoked by only 1 out of 3. Of the 6 transferred frames, 4 were refuted, if not dismissed out of hand, namely Frame 3 – Threat to freedom of speech, Frame 7 – Threat to historical and cultural authenticity, Frame 8 – Appeal to authority, and Frame 10 – Foreign influence. The other 2, significantly, were accepted as valid concerns: Frame 6 – Language change is difficult, and Frame 11 – Inclusive language may exclude.

For example, referring to Jolivet's letter to the *Académie* ('Academy'), i.e., Frame 8 – Appeal to Authority, Halleux (2021) writes in *La Libre Belgique*:

*Certains peuvent se demander ce qu'en pense l'Académie française. La question semble légitime, mais elle ne l'est pas. Combien de personnes disent « la Covid » parce que Messieurs, les académiciens, l'ont décidé ?*¹¹

As for *Le Soir*, the newspaper uses a sense of humour as well as a grammatical device, *le conditionnel* ('the conditional tense'), to call into question the validity of Frame 10 – Foreign influence: "*Reste au dictionnaire à définir le wokisme dont il serait, selon certains, atteint*" ('It is now up to the dictionary to define the wokeism that some would argue afflicts it') (Declercq 2021, 9). *Le Soir*, further, counters Frame 3 – Threat of freedom of speech, repeatedly, stating "*c'est à chacun de se positionner*" ('it is up to the language user to take a position'), and "*n'oblige personne à utiliser ces mots*" ('forces no one to use these words') (Declercq 2021, 9). Finally, the daily opposes Frame 7 – Threat to historical or cultural authenticity, by suggesting that the new pronoun does not undo or diminish French in any way: "*sans rien enlever au français*" (Declercq 2021, 9).

Halleux (2021) writing dans *La Libre Belgique* also refutes Frame 3 – Threat to freedom of speech – "*rien n'oblige l'utilisation du « iel »*" ('there is no obligation to use "*iel*"'), but does accept that the new pronoun may inject new grammatical challenges into the French language, and hence adheres to Frame 6 – Language change is difficult.

[...] des problèmes grammaticaux : comment accorder ce nouveau pronom ? Au masculin, au féminin, avec un point médian ? Lorsqu'on pense aux nombreuses règles à respecter en français, est-il vraiment nécessaire d'y ajouter une nouvelle complexité ? (Halleux 2021)¹²

La Libre Belgique further accepts that the proposals for gender-inclusive spelling, such as the use of the *point médian* ('interpunct' or 'middle dot'), may negatively impact the visually impaired. Frame 11 – Inclusive language may exclude is, therefore, also accepted.

¹¹ Some may be tempted to check what the *Académie française* ('French Academy') thinks about this. Though that may seem like a worthwhile approach, it really is not. How many people say "*la Covid*" [instead of the masculine *le Covid*] simply because that is what the members of the *Académie* have decided?

¹² [...] grammatical problems: how would one indicate gender agreement with this new pronoun? With a masculine or feminine ending, or with both separated by a middle dot? Given the sheer number of rules that have to be respected in French, is it really necessary to complicate the grammar further?

[...] *l'utilisation du point médian, par exemple, exclut certaines personnes de la société. En effet, les logiciels de lecture à voix haute ne reconnaissent pour l'instant pas ces graphies et la question se poserait également pour les lectures en braille. Ce rêve d'une inclusion parfaite de la société ne serait ainsi qu'une utopie.*

(Halleux 2021)¹³

Let us now turn to the Dutch-language corpus, and examine framing in *De Standaard*, *De Morgen*, *De Gazet van Antwerpen*, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, *Het Nieuwsblad*, and *Het Belang van Limburg*.

5.2 Dutch-language corpus

Table 5 looks at the general stance of the six analyzed Dutch-language newspapers. The data show that, like their French-language counterparts, none of the Flemish newspapers viewed gender-neutral pronouns, such as *iel*, and other proposals for gender-neutral language negatively. Of the 10 relevant articles composing the Dutch-language corpus, 5, i.e., 50%, viewed these innovations through a positive lens, while the remaining 5, i.e., the other 50%, took a more neutral stand. Most of the articles, 7 out of 10, i.e., 70%, used humour, sarcasm, metaphors, and word play to describe the heated debate in France, and particularly the objections voiced by French politicians, Jolivet and Blanquer. Only 3, i.e., 30%, of the analyzed articles adopted a predominantly informative, and neutral tone. And at least 5, i.e., 50%, expressed surprise at the strong opposition coming from France's political and intellectual elite.

<i>Stance -iel</i>	positive	neutral	negative
	5	5	
<i>Stance gender-neutral / inclusive language</i>	positive	neutral	negative
	5	5	
<i>Tone of article</i>	neutral	bemused	mocking
	3	5	7

Table 5: Framing data – General stance of Belgian Dutch-language press.

¹³ [...] using the middle dot, for instance, excludes certain members of society. Text-to-speech software does not currently recognize these spelling innovations and the middle dot also appears to be problematic for braille readers. The dream of a perfectly inclusive society may be nothing short of utopia.

Leftist *De Morgen* provides a good example of the contemptuous and dismissive language used to ridicule Jolivet and Blanquer by the Flemish press. The passage below is a case in point. It uses metaphorical language and biting humour to mock Jolivet's appeal to the *Académie* ('Academy'):

De Franse parlementariër François Jolivet was met stomheid geslagen. Op hoge poten klopte de partijgenoot van president Macron afgelopen week aan bij de Académie française, hoeder van de Franse taal. Hadden zij al eens nagedacht over dat vermaledijde drieletterwoord dat nu zomaar bleek opgenomen in de lijst van woordenboek Le Petit Robert?
(Huisman 2021)¹⁴

This type of language is not limited to the leftist press, however. Indeed, similar language can also be found in leading Flemish newspaper, *De Standaard*, which is politically more conservative but offered, as shown in 4.2, the most extensive reporting on the matter of *iel* during the period under review. Below an example:

Nooit ofte nimmer zal de ware taalridder zwichten en aan deze absurditeit deelnemen, is de teneur. De behoefte aan genderneutraal taalgebruik wordt tot 'de waan van de dag' gerekend, een doorgeschoten uitwas van de woke-cultuur, die getuigt van een gebrek aan zelfrelativering.
(Vereecken 2021, 26)¹⁵

De Standaard's sister newspaper, *Het Nieuwsblad*, likewise, uses metaphorical language to ridicule Jolivet's opposition to *iel*:

Alleen stuit dat [...] nu op forse kritiek vanuit politieke hoek. Het begon met een tweet van gedeputeerde François Jolivet (LREM), die de neus ophaalt voor de komst van inclusief taalgebruik.
(Clemens 2021a, 24)¹⁶

Flemish newspapers further contend that France's elite may be 'making a mountain out of a molehill' so to speak. They apply, to that effect, a stylistic device, similar to the one already encountered in *La Libre Belgique*, which consists in creating a contrast between the rather small size of the problematic pronoun and the hyperbolic rhetoric coming from certain political and intellectual quarters.

¹⁴ French member of parliament François Jolivet was utterly dumbfounded. Outraged, the fellow member of president Macron's party turned to the *Académie française*, the guardian of the French language, for advice. Did they happen to have an opinion about that accursed three-letter word that without much warning had been included in the dictionary *Le Petit Robert*?

¹⁵ Never, in any circumstances, shall the true defender of the French language give in and adopt this absurdity, is the dominant stance. The need for gender-neutral language is viewed as the whimsy of the day, as an out-of-control excrescence of woke culture, demonstrating a profound inability to put things in perspective.

¹⁶ But now this [...] is being met with strong political opposition [...]. It all started with a tweet from member of parliament François Jolivet (LREM), who snubs his nose at the use of inclusive language.

Het Belang van Limburg provides a clear example: “*Heisa in Frankrijk over genderneutraal voornaamwoord. Een woord van drie letters veroorzaakt in Frankrijk serieuze commotie*”¹⁷ (Clemens 2021b, 22).

Mockery and ridicule regularly give way to consternation, either explicitly stated or implicitly suggested. Writing in *De Standaard*, journalist Kathleen Vereecken, for instance, confides to the reader:

Ik verbaas me over de onverzettelijkheid, de halsstarrigheid waarmee sommigen de Heilige Onveranderlijke Taal te vuur en te zwaard blijven verdedigen, alsof elke verandering, elke toevoeging, hoe miniem ook, hen diep kwetst.

(Vereecken 2021, 26)¹⁸

Other newspapers opt for more subtle ways to signal surprise. *Het Belang van Limburg* is a case in point. By placing the adverb, *zelfs* (‘even’), at the start of the sentence below, the newspaper highlights the unusual nature of Brigitte Macron’s interjection: “*Zelfs Brigitte Macron, echtgenote van de Franse president en vroeger een lerares Frans, liet zich tijdens een officieel bezoek een mening ontvallen*”¹⁹ (Clemens 2021b, 24).

Attempts at explaining the raging debate in France are formulated, as one would expect, in more informative language, though not necessarily objective or neutral language. *De Morgen*, for instance, uses grammatical devices, lexical means, and punctuation, all bolded in the segment below, to create distance from what is asserted and inject doubt:

*Een deel van politiek Frankrijk is zeer gevoelig voor de **veronderstelde** import van ‘wokeisme’ [...]. Zij zien de aandacht voor onderwerpen als gender, ras en koloniaal verleden als een Amerikaanse discussie die de Franse identiteit bedreigt – de nadruk op minderheden **zou** het separatisme aanwakkeren.* (Huisman 2021, sp)²⁰

Finally, at least 8 of the 10 articles, i.e., 80%, refer in their report on France’s battle over *iel* also to the newly proposed gender-neutral pronouns for the Dutch language: *die* (‘they’) and *hen* (‘they’). These references tend to be

¹⁷ Uproar in France over a gender-neutral pronoun. A word of only three letters causes quite a commotion in France.

¹⁸ I am amazed at the intransigence, the stubbornness displayed by those who continue to staunchly defend the Sacred Never-to-be-changed Language, as if any modification, any addition, however small, deeply offends them.

¹⁹ Even Brigitte Macron, the wife of the French president and previously a French teacher, commented on the matter during an official visit.

²⁰ Many French politicians and stakeholders are highly sensitive to the **supposed** import of ‘wokeism’ [...]. They see in the attention given to topics such as gender, race and colonial past an American influence that threatens French cultural identity – the emphasis on minority rights **could** incite separatism.

phrased in more neutral and informative language (with the notable exception of one outspokenly feminist op ed in *De Standaard*), and vary in length, with *Het Laatste Nieuws* dedicating the bulk of its piece to gender-neutral developments in the Dutch language.

Let us now turn to the issue of framing in the six Dutch-language newspapers. Table 6 below analyzes frame spread from France's media-outlets to Belgium's Dutch-language printed press.

FRAME	Invoked	Not invoked	Accepted	Refuted
Frame 1 – Cross-cultural arguments		10		
Frame 2 – Language is a trivial concern	4	6		4
Frame 3 – Threat to freedom of speech	5	5		5
Frame 4 – Masculine generics are <i>not</i> sexist	5	5		5
Frame 5 – Etymological arguments		10		
Frame 6 – Language change is difficult	7	3	5	2
Frame 7 – Threat to historical or cultural authenticity	8	2	1	7
Frame 8 – Appeal to authority	6	4		6
Frame 9 – Proponents lack grammatical knowledge		10		
Frame 10 – Foreign influence	7	3	4	3
Frame 11 – Inclusive language may exclude	3	7	1	2
Frame 12 – Esthetic arguments	4	6	3	1

Table 6: Framing data – Invoked, accepted, and refuted frames in Belgian Dutch-language press.

The ten articles composing the Dutch-language corpus reproduced at least 9 of the 12 frames described in section 3 above. These are: Frame 2 – Language is a trivial concern, Frame 3 – Threat to freedom of speech, Frame 4 – Masculine generics are *not* sexist, Frame 6 – Language change is difficult, Frame 7 – Threat to historical or cultural authenticity, Frame 8 – Appeal to authority, Frame 10 – Foreign influence, Frame 11 – Inclusive language may exclude, and Frame 12 – Esthetic arguments.

At least 5 of the 9 invoked frames are refuted in very strong terms. These are: Frame 2 – Language is a trivial concern, Frame 3 – Threat to freedom of speech, Frame 4 – Masculine generics are *not* sexist, and not surprisingly, Frame 7 – Threat to historical or cultural authenticity, and Frame 8 – Appeal to authority, the two frames most linked to Jolivet’s and Blanquer’s actions and tweets. The reader will notice considerable overlap here with the Belgian French-language corpus, which did not activate Frames 2 and 4, but also firmly rejected Frames 3, 7, and 8.

The Flemish dailies, further, deviate somewhat from their Walloon counterparts with respect to their treatment of Frames 10, 11, and 12. Frame 10 – Foreign influence was invoked only once by the French-language corpus and rejected, but is activated in 7 of the 10 Dutch-language articles, with 4 accepting the foreign origin of gender-neutral language initiatives, and 3 rejecting the pejorative interpretation, often associated with this frame, of the Anglosphere’s ‘wokeism’. *De Standaard*, for instance, explains rather matter-of-factly and without judgment:

De trend komt uit de VS, waar het genderneutrale voornaamwoord they gebruikelijk is. Steeds meer Amerikanen geven op sociale netwerken en [...] op hun cv aan in welk geslacht zij zich thuisvoelen. (De Bouw 2021a, 4)²¹

De Morgen, on the other hand, takes a different approach by subtly criticizing opponents of gender-neutral and inclusive language through the activation and rejection of Frame 10’s negative view of woke ideology. Note, in this regard, the use of *van leer trekken* which translates pejoratively to ‘to rail against’ in the quoted sentence below.

²¹ This trend comes from the US, where the gender-neutral pronoun *they* is quite common. More and more Americans indicate on social networks and [...] in their cv with which gender they identify.

Blanquer trekt vaker van leer tegen de invloed van ‘woke’ – begin dit jaar wilde hij nog een onderzoek laten uitvoeren naar woke-activisme op universiteiten.
(Huisman 2021, sp)²²

As for Frame 11 - Inclusive language may exclude, it is activated by 3 out of 10 articles, seemingly also without unanimous approval or disapproval. The articles rejecting the frame link its narrative, regarding the negative impact of gender-neutral language on children with learning difficulties for instance, negatively to the actions of Jolivet and Blanquer. The *Gazette van Antwerpen* is a case in point:

In brieven of mails kom je steeds vaker de aanhef Cher.e.s Français.e.s tegen. Begin dit jaar pleitte Jolivet voor een verbod. Toenmalig premier Édouard Philippe verbood zijn ministers het gebruik ervan en Blanquer verbood genderneutrale spelling op school. Volgens hem leidt die tot moeilijkheden bij het aanleren van de taal.
(De Bouw 2021b, sp)²³

Het Laatste Nieuws, however, takes a rather different view and joins in its treatment of Frame 11 *La Libre Belgique*, the sole Walloon daily that invoked and accepted the frame. While *La Libre Belgique* mentioned the challenges posed by new spelling conventions such as the *point médian* ('middle-dot') especially for the visually impaired, *Het Laatste Nieuws* focuses on older speakers of Dutch and the unease they may experience while mastering the new gender-neutral language conventions.

Je merkt dat jongere mensen er al beter mee vertrouwd zijn dan oudere generaties [...]. De gemiddelde Vlaming heeft een open geest, maar voelt zich in deze materie tot een kind gereduceerd dat terug moet leren spreken en dat van mama een standje krijgt. ‘Het is niet hij, het is hen!’ Dat voelt vernederend. Dit vraagt om een goede aanpak.
(Van der Linden 2021, 14)²⁴

²² This is not the first time that Blanquer rails against the influence of ‘woke’ culture – earlier this year he wanted to launch an investigation into the presence of woke-activism on university campuses.

²³ More and more letters and emails now start with the salutation *Cher.e.s Français.e.s*. At the beginning of the year, Jolivet argued for a ban on the middle-dot. Former premier Édouard Philippe forbade his ministers to use it, and Blanquer banned gender-neutral spelling in schools. According to him these gender-neutral spelling innovations may impede language learning.

²⁴ What we are seeing is that younger people are already more familiar with using [gender-neutral innovations] than older people [...]. The average Fleming is open-minded, but when it comes to these innovations, they feel reduced to the state of a child that is learning how to speak and that is being scolded by mommy for making a mistake. ‘No, do not say he, say they!’ That can be rather humiliating. An approach that is sensitive to this is needed here.

Frame 12 – Esthetic arguments, absent from the French-language corpus, is used in 4 of the 10 Dutch-language articles, with 3 subscribing to its narrative. These articles criticize the appearance or form of certain gender-neutral or inclusive innovations without however opposing the principle underlying gender-neutral or inclusive language. *De Standaard*, for instance, writes:

Zo ontstaan er soms gek uitzierende constructies, die vooral op universiteiten steeds populairder worden. Zo schrijf je niet Chers lecteurs (Beste lezers), maar wel Cher.e.s lecteur.rice.s. (De Bouw 2021a, 4)²⁵

Interestingly, another paper, *Het Laatste Nieuws*, activates Frame 12 to give greater legitimacy to *iel* and also to *die* and *hen*, the Dutch language's new gender-neutral pronouns:

iel. Samentrekking van het Franse 'il' en 'elle', een beetje van de twee. Dat is ook wel het gebrek aan deze nieuwkomer [...]. Maar goed, de andere optie is een woord dat nog niet bestaat. Ook dat heeft nadelen, een volledig nieuw voornaamwoord kan artificieel aanvoelen. Ook in Nederland en Vlaanderen is daar al mee geëxperimenteerd. Xy. Qij. Hin. Vij. Shij. Zhij. Balletjes die al zijn opgeworpen door taalkundigen of non-binairen zelf. [...] « Zhij neemt zhaar fiets ». Om zhot van te worden. [...] Zo is men dan rond 2016 uitgekomen bij 'die' en 'hen'. (Van der Linden 2021, 14)²⁶

Finally, like their Walloon counterparts, Flemish newspapers tend to side with Frame 6 – Language change is difficult, invoked by 7 out of 10 and accepted by 5. The frame is often applied to gender-neutral and inclusive developments in the Dutch language, with the message that language change takes time but is unavoidable, also when it comes to gender-neutral pronouns. *Het Nieuwsblad*, for instance, quotes Ruud Hendrickx, the Flemish editor-in-chief of the *Van Dale* dictionary:

Persoonlijk denk ik dat 'die' gemakkelijker ingang zal vinden. Eigenlijk zit dat al honderden jaren op de grens tussen aanwijzend voornaamwoord en neutraal voornaamwoord. 'Hen' klinkt voor veel mensen grammaticaal vreemder. Ik denk niet dat het zo gemakkelijk de taal zal binnensluipen. Je

²⁵ This sometimes leads to weird looking constructions, that are increasingly popular especially on university campuses. For instance, instead of *Chers lecteurs* (Dear readers), one now writes *Cher.e.s lecteur.rice.s*.

²⁶ *iel*. Contraction of the French pronouns 'il' and 'elle', a little bit of both. That is admittedly the main disadvantage of this newcomer [...]. However, the other option is a word that does not yet exist. That also comes with drawbacks, as a completely new pronoun can seem quite artificial. In the Netherlands and Flanders, we have already experimented with such neologisms. *Xy. Qij. Hin. Vij. Shij. Zhij*. Proposals from linguists but also non-binary people themselves. [...] "Zhe takes zher bike". Enough to go Xrazy. [...] And that is why around 2016 we settled on 'die' and 'hen' ('they').

kan niet zomaar beslissen wat alle Nederlandstaligen nu moeten gebruiken. Zo werkt het niet. (Het Nieuwsblad 2021, 24)²⁷

Note that Hendrickx also takes a stand here against Frame 3 – Threat to freedom of speech, by clearly stating that the evolution is a democratic process decided by the speakers of the language through language use, adding that the task of lexicographers like himself is to describe “*de feitelijke taalsituatie zonder oordeel*” (‘actual language use without any value judgement’). As for *Het Laatste Nieuws*, it ends with the conclusion that “*genderneutraal spreken op een dag gewoner kan aanvoelen dan vandaag*” (‘one day gender-neutral language will feel much less awkward than today’), linking today’s fight for the inclusion of non-binary people through the use of gender-neutral pronouns to changes that occurred in the French language following the French Revolution:

Na de Franse Revolutie is er ook veel veranderd, de aparte aansprekingen voor mensen van adel vielen weg. Maar opnieuw: dat was een proces van vele jaren. (Van der Linden 2021, 14)²⁸

6. Conclusion

The agenda-setting and framing data analyzed above show similar positioning of Belgium’s French and Dutch-language presses with respect to the debate surrounding *iel* in neighbouring France, and gender-neutral and inclusive language in general, though the matter, perhaps not unimportantly, received greater attention in Flanders than in Wallonia. Both presses viewed the controversy sparked by *iel*’s inclusion in *Le Robert* through a negative lens but looked favourably on gender-neutral and inclusive language in general, their careful reservations concerning mostly Frame 6 – Language change is difficult, as well as Frame 11 – Inclusive language may exclude. These reservations, however, are not presented as insurmountable, nor as true counterarguments to gender-neutral and inclusive language.

The positioning in the Belgian French-language press can be seen as a repeat of what occurred during the long and drawn-out debate in the Francosphere concerning the feminization of professional titles. This debate was

²⁷ Personally, I think that ‘*die*’ will find its way into Dutch language usage more easily. In fact, for hundreds of years now, ‘*die*’ has been sitting somewhere on the border between a demonstrative pronoun and a neutral pronoun. ‘*Hen*’ is felt to be grammatically awkward by many people. I do not think that it will be able to infiltrate language usage that easily. No one can decide which pronoun speakers of Dutch should use. That is not how it works.

²⁸ Following the French Revolution, a lot changed as well, for instance titles specifically used to address nobility were removed from language use. But again: that was a gradual process over many years.

settled relatively early in Quebec (1979),²⁹ more than a decade later in Belgium (1993),³⁰ and in France only in 2019, when the *Académie* ('Academy') finally accepted feminized professional titles, despite the publication 20 years earlier by the *Institut national de la langue française* ('National Institute for the French language'), with the support of Lionel Jospin, then prime minister of France, of *Femme, j'écris ton nom* ('Woman, I write your name'), a guide vehemently opposed, however, by the *Académie*. The *Académie's* stubborn resistance to non-sexist language, not seen elsewhere in the Francosphere, badly tarnished the institution's reputation, causing many intellectuals and language specialists, including Belgian linguists Dister and Moreau (2020, 75) to object to the *Académie's* role as guardian of the French language.

The rejection of the authority of the *Académie* by Belgian linguists and intellectuals is perhaps another sign of the gradual "*autonomisation*" ('empowerment') of French as spoken in Belgium (Hambye & Francard 2004) and of an emerging pluri-centric view of the French language as having several codified standard forms, of which one not only pertains to but is also claimed by Belgium's francophones. This move away from the *Académie* and the norm set in Paris is also apparent in *La Libre Belgique's* story on *iel*, which is dismissive of the *Académie* ("*Combien de personnes disent « la covid » parce que Messieurs les académiciens l'ont décidé?*")³¹ and then refers the reader to Dister's and Moreau's guide on inclusive writing for guidance:

Pour finir, on [...] conseille la lecture de l'essai « Inclure sans exclure » d'Anne Dister pour approfondir la question et pouvoir se lancer dans les débats à venir en toute connaissance de cause.
(Halleux 2021, sp)³²

The positioning in Belgium's Dutch-language press is no less interesting. As seen above, all six newspapers, from conservative *De Standaard* to leftist *De Morgen* to regional *Gazet van Antwerpen*, made light of the "*taalstrijd*" ('language conflict') (De Bouw 2021a, 4) in neighbouring France, and disparaged Jolivet's and Blanquer's objections to *iel's* inclusion in *Le Robert*. And interestingly, at least 8 of the 10 Dutch-language news stories referred to gender-neutral innovations in the Dutch language, generally switching, at that point in the story, to a more

²⁹ Office québécois de la langue française

³⁰ Anne Dister et Moreau *Mettre au féminin*, 1^{ère} édition datant de 1993, Fédération Wallonie-Bruxelles

³¹ How many people say "*la Covid*" [instead of the masculine *le Covid*] simply because that is what the members of the *Académie* have decided?

³² Finally, we [...] encourage all of you to read the essay "*Inclure sans exclure*" ('Inclusion without exclusion') d'Anne Dister to study the matter in greater detail and to be able to take part in future debates on the issue fully informed.

thoughtful and informative tone, while debating possible challenges, considered however as temporary, linked to Frame 6 – Language change is difficult and Frame 11 – Inclusive language may exclude. This positioning may have helped set the tone for another related event that was about to occur: the publication in March 2022 of a new edition of the *Van Dale* dictionary of the Dutch language, containing nearly 15,000 entries, with all words indicating a person presented, for the first time, in a gender-neutral or inclusive format: *de minister m/v/x* ('the minister m/f/x').³³ The analyzed Dutch-language newspapers dedicated a total of 8 articles to this story, which seemingly confirmed *Het Laatste Nieuws'* contention:

We moeten dit durven te benoemen voor wat het is: een machtsstrijd. Zij die zich onvoldoende gehoord voelden, dwingen rechten af. Een [...] deel van de maatschappij verzet zich, maar moet intussen vaststellen dat universiteiten in e-mails voornaamwoorden vermijden, enzovoort. Kortom, ze worden ingehaald door feiten.
(Van der Linden 2021, 14)³⁴

Dictionary entries can now be added to these facts ('*feiten*'), whether *Le Robert* for the French language or the *Van Dale* for the Dutch language.

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³³ Also in 2022, *Onze Taal* ('Our Language'), the preeminent scholarly association dedicated to the study of the Dutch language, published a guide to gender-neutral and inclusive language developments penned by Dutch linguist and lexicographer Vivien Waszink.

³⁴ We need to see this for what it is: a power struggle. Those who felt ignored are demanding that their rights be respected. Some [...] sections of society are resisting, while on university campuses email signatures now include preferred pronouns, etc. In short, those who are resisting are left behind by the facts.

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