Changing Faces of Morphological Innovation in French: Gender-Marking in Feminist Discourse on Twitter

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Morphological innovations have been well documented in both written and spoken French [1] [2]. With the arrival of digital media, new forms and processes of morphological innovation have seen the light that, from a sociolinguistic perspective, are particularly noteworthy because they allow social media platform users to convey dialogically, within the flow of simultaneous digital interaction, social-indexical meaning that is not available or could be outright forbidden by the conventions of Standard French in established written genres [3] [4]. Such innovations, particularly frequent on social media in recent years, have been for instance new forms of gender marking that are privileged spaces for signifying alternative conceptions of gender and figures of personhood [5]. These innovative forms of language are often unique to digital media and unconventional in both informal oral and written discourse. To date, they have not been subjected to systematic linguistic investigations.

This study examines a sample of 65,131 publicly available tweets extracted, using R software [6] and the Rtweet package [7], over a period of two months from 26 users of #AfrofemTwitter, a Francophone Black feminist Twitter community. #AfrofemTwitter is a hotbed for linguistic expressions pertaining to racial and gender identities in France. Many of the group's online conversations, centered on language and social justice, focus on the active use of so-called *inclusive writing*, a spelling innovation that manipulates variable gender markings by juxtaposing masculine and feminine forms and, sometimes simultaneously, also allows the creation of new forms.

Following previous categorizations in French morphology, the corpus has been divided into closed class and open class items, with pronouns and determiners included in the former and nouns and adjectives added to the latter. Each item was tagged for grammatical information on gender and number. Gender categories were tagged as follows: 'single forms' (e.g. *nous* 'we' and *jeune* 'young'), 'binary forms' (e.g *un.e* 'a' and *étudiant.e* 'student'), and 'non-binary/gender neutral forms' (e.g. *iel* 'they' in addition to *il* 'he' and *elle* 'she' and *facteurice* in addition to *facteur* and *factrice* 'mail carrier'). Number marking was classified as singular or plural. It was hypothesized that non-binary/gender neutral marking would appear sparsely and non-systematically in most users' tweets as an index of gender inclusive ideologies. It was also projected that open class forms will be the most privileged category for morphological and lexical innovation.

Preliminary results indicate the following. Non-binary/gender neutral marking, such as *celleux* 'those' in (1), is relatively infrequent but can be recurrent in some users' tweets, which indicates that personal styles of communication and networks could play a role in the emergence and diffusion of such forms, as some of them appear in retweets but not in original tweets. As expected, innovative gender marking is more frequent for lexical items such as in (2) and (3), but typographic representations with or without dots also allow considerable variation for innovative marking within grammatical structures, as in (1), (2), and (3).

Through examples such as the ones quoted here, this study will make the case for a new approach to digital vernacular writing as a resource for the systematic study of extra-grammatical innovations in French morphology [2] [8].

Examples:

*(1)   Il appartiendra donc au ministère public de démontrer que Nick Conrad avait véritablement la volonté et la conscience de diffuser ce son pour sérieusement provoquer **tous.tes celleux** qui l'écouteraient à véritablement allez pendre les **blanc.he.s**, écarteler les bébés blancs*
'It will be up to the government to show that Nick Conrad purposefully wanted to diffuse this song to actually incite **all* those**** who would listen to it to really go hang **white people*****, quarter white babies'

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* In Standard French (SF): tous (masc) or toutes (fem)

**In SF: celle (fem) or ceux (masc)

***In SF: blancs (masc) or blanches (fem)
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*(2) Si des **roux.sses*** organisaient des réunions non mixtes entre **roux.sses** pour parler ensemble de ce qu'**iels**** vivent à ce titre, ça vous dérangerait de ne pas pouvoir y participer ? RTs en masse* ☺
'If **red heads** organized meetings for only **red heads** to talk about what they live as such, would it bother you not to be allowed to attend? RT massively ☺'

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* In SF: roux (masc) or rousses (fem)

**In SF: elles (fem) or ils (masc)
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*(3) Et si vous ne voulez pas follow, retweetez please. **Monma futur.e client.e** est peut-être dans vos TL*
'If you don't want to follow [me], please retweet. **My* future** customer***** might be in your TL.

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* In SF: mon (masc) or ma (fem)

**In SF: future (fem) or futur (masc)

***In SF: client (masc) or cliente (fem)
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