

# Linguistic Prescription, Ideological Structure and the Actuation of Linguistic Changes: Grammatical Gender in French Parliamentary Debates

Heather Burnett & Olivier Bonami  
Laboratoire de Linguistique Formelle  
CNRS-Université Paris-Diderot

## Abstract

In this paper, we present the first quantitative study of the linguistic and social factors that condition the use of masculine vs feminine g(rammatical) gender with reference to women (eg. *Madame le ministre* vs *Madame la ministre*), focusing on variation in the transcripts of the debates of the Assemblée Nationale (AN). In 1986, Prime Minister Fabius legislated the use of feminine grammatical gender in the AN and similar government institutions; however, we show that this prescription had little to no effect on the speech of the politicians at the time. Then, in 1998, Prime Minister Jospin issued a statement reiterating Fabius' policy. We show that, unlike 12 years earlier, the feminine form successfully replaces the masculine form within the space of a year. Our main claim in this paper is that changes in the use of feminine grammatical gender and differences in the effectiveness of Fabius/Jospin's language policy are the result of changes in gender ideologies in France between the mid 1980s and mid 1990s. We argue that the mid 1990s saw the emergence of a new social type (or persona) for female politicians, which only feminine g-gender can construct. We hypothesize that Jospin's reinforcement of Fabius' policy in 1998 was successful because it strengthened an existing association between feminine g-gender and a female political persona; whereas, Fabius' original policy was unsuccessful because it tried to build on ideological structure that was not shared by a large portion of the Assemblée Nationale. Our case study thus suggests that linguistic prescriptions will only be successful if they build on existing ideologies in the speech community and highlights the role that (non)linguistic discourses can play in the actuation and spread of linguistic change.

# 1 Introduction

This paper investigates the role that social changes and speaker ideologies play in French grammatical gender assignment and the conditions under which language policies can contribute to the actuation and progression of linguistic changes.

French is a grammatical gender language, which means that French grammar sorts all nouns into classes that determine patterns of agreement with other linguistic expressions. For example, the noun *lune* ‘moon’ has feminine grammatical gender (henceforth **g-gender**) since, when it appears in a noun phrase such as (1-a), it co-occurs with the feminine form of the article *la* and the feminine form of the adjective *belle*. The noun *soleil* ‘sun’, on the other hand, has masculine g-gender, as shown by the fact that it must appear with the masculine forms of article and adjective (1-b).

- (1)    a.    la belle lune                                 ‘the beautiful moon’  
        b.    le beau soleil                                 ‘the beautiful sun’

French animate nouns display a complex relationship between g-gender and interpretation, particularly with respect to the mapping between masculine/feminine g-gender and male/female social gender (henceforth **s-gender**). With some nouns, there appears to be no relation between grammatical and social gender. For example, the noun *personne* ‘person’ has only feminine g-gender and applies naturally to both men and women (2).

- (2) a. La personne qui est partie en premier...  
 b. \*Le personne qui est parti en premier...  
 'The (male or female) person who left first...

With the vast majority of human nouns, however, masculine g-gender aligns with male s-gender, and feminine g-gender aligns with female s-gender. We find this pattern both when masculine and feminine nouns are distinguished by their endings (eg. *boulang~~er~~*/*boulang~~ère~~* (3)), and when a single noun form appears in both masculine and feminine agreement configurations (4), which Corbett (1991) calls the **common gender** pattern.<sup>1</sup>

- |     |                     |                    |
|-----|---------------------|--------------------|
| (3) | Different noun form |                    |
|     | a. Le boulanger     | ‘The male baker’   |
|     | b. La boulangère    | ‘The female baker’ |
| (4) | Common gender       |                    |

<sup>1</sup>Confusingly, the adjective *epicene* is used by Corbett (1991) and most English-speaking authors to qualify nouns patterning like *personne* (one single grammatical gender irrespective of social gender), while the French grammatical tradition mostly uses it for nouns patterning like *journaliste* (one single form found with both grammatical genders). In the interest of clarity we will avoid this adjective altogether.

- a. Un journaliste ‘A male journalist’
- b. Une journaliste ‘A female journalist’

The main focus of this paper is a class of nouns that exemplify yet a third g-gender/s-gender mapping relation: the *noms de métier et de fonction* ‘professional nouns’. As shown in (5)-(6), a noun phrase with masculine grammatical gender, such as *le président* or *le ministre*, can be used to pick out either men or women; however, a noun phrase with feminine g-gender, such as *la présidente/la ministre*, exclusively picks out women.

- (5) Different noun form
  - a. Le président ‘the (male or female) president’
  - b. La présidente ‘the female president’
- (6) Common gender
  - a. Le ministre ‘the (male or female) minister’
  - b. La ministre ‘the female minister’

This article provides (to our knowledge) the first quantitative study of the use of these *noms de métier et de fonction*, and we study the evolution of the use of feminine vs masculine g-gender in expressions referring to women in the transcripts of the *Assemblée Nationale* (the French House of Representatives). These transcripts feature a large amount of intra-speaker variation in g-gender, and an example of such variation is found in (7): On January 29th 1997, Jean-Marc Ayrault uses the masculine g-gender to refer to a female minister (7-a),<sup>2</sup> and on December 19th of that year, he uses the feminine (7-b).<sup>3</sup>

- (7) Madame **le/la** ministre ‘Madam Minister’
  - a. **M. Jean-Marc Ayrault.** Madame **le** ministre de l’environnement, plus de 6 000 personnes ont défilé, samedi dernier, dans les rues de Nantes, pour protester contre l’autorisation donnée par le Gouvernement à EDF de remblayer la zone humide du Carnet dans l’estuaire de la Loire. (29/01/1997)
  - b. **M. Jean-Marc Ayrault.** Monsieur le président, madame **la** ministre, mes chers collègues, tout à l’heure, le président Bayrou me reprochait d’avoir dit que nous étions venus pour voter le projet de loi de finances. (19/12/1997)

The use of grammatical gender in expressions referring to women has been the subject of enormous amounts of prescription and language planning in France and in the *Assemblée Nationale* itself (see Houdebine, 1987, 1998; Burr, 2003; Viennot, 2014, among others),

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<sup>2</sup>Madam Environment Minister, more than 6000 people marched last Saturday in the streets of Nantes to protest the government’s authorisation of EDF to fill wet zone of the Carnet in the Loire estuary.

<sup>3</sup>Mr. President, Madam Minister, my dear colleagues, earlier President Bayrou reproached me for having said that we had come to vote on the finance law...

and these actions can be naturally divided into two main waves of activism at the end of the 20th century. The first started around 1984, when Yvette Roudy, France’s first women’s rights minister, headed a commission aimed at feminizing the *noms de métier et de fonction*. Two years later, the commission recommends the use of feminine grammatical gender (eg. *la ministre*) and, in some cases, nouns with feminine endings (eg. *la présidente*). Then, on March 11th 1986, the Socialist Prime Minister Laurent Fabius legislated the use of the language recommended by the commission in the Assemblée Nationale and in official documents.

In order to see what effect this policy had on speech in the AN, we constituted a corpus of the ‘corrected’ transcripts (‘compte rendus’) of the *Assemblée Nationale*, focusing on the period from 1982-2017.<sup>4</sup> From this corpus we automatically extracted all female terms of address; that is, strings of the form *Madame le/la N*. This resulted in a full dataset containing 99,480 tokens. We focused on terms of address because the conditions on the use of the title (*Madame/Monsieur*) make it easy to automatically identify female referents of grammatically masculine expressions. In particular, although it is possible to use masculine g-gender to address a female minister, as shown in (8-b), the social gender of the referent must nevertheless be linguistically reflected in the female title *Madame*. In other words, titles in French track s-gender in a way that g-gender does not, and this makes terms of address particularly useful for corpus studies on g-gender alternations.

- (8) a. **To M. Strauss-Kahn: Monsieur** le ministre, vous avez tort.  
 b. **To Mme. Royal: Madame** le ministre, vous avez tort.  
 ‘Mr./Madam minister, you are wrong.’

In the general case, it is not so easy to identify female referents from grammatical properties of the noun phrase. As shown in (9), a masculine noun phrase can have either a female or male referent, so the context of each utterance must be examined by hand in order to determine whether the referent is male or female, and it is not feasible to do this with the 723915 tokens of *ministre* in the corpus or any of the other nouns of interest. We therefore leave extending this investigation to argument noun phrases and pronouns to future work.

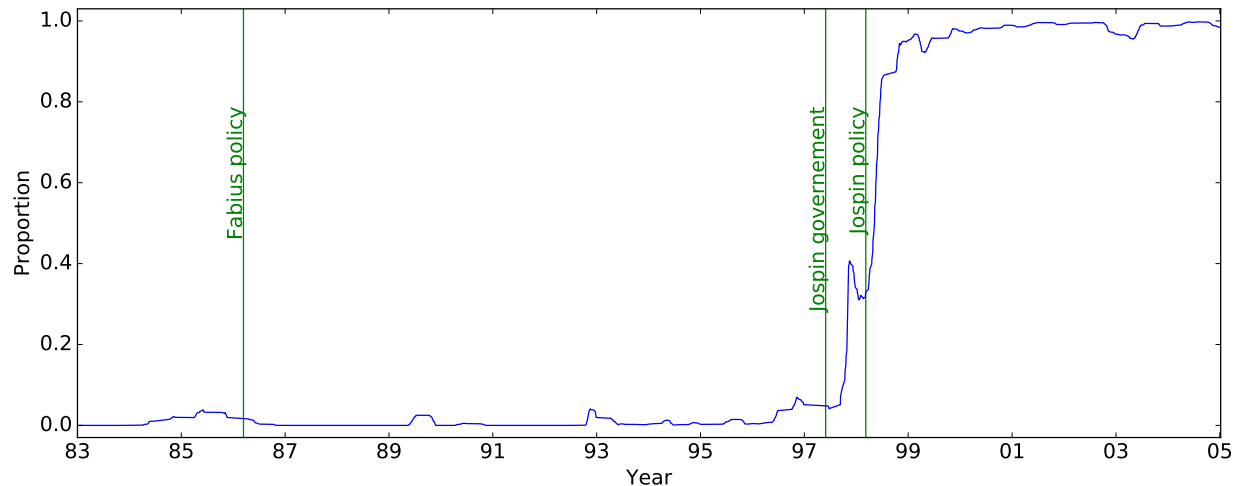
- (9) **About M. Strauss-Kahn/Mme. Royal:**  
**Le** ministre a tort.  
 ‘The minister is wrong.’

Figure 1 shows the proportion of the use of feminine vs masculine grammatical gender in female terms of address (*Madame le/la N*) in the Assemblée Nationale from 1983 to 2005. Consistent with reports based on qualitative observations (Houdebine, 1987; Brick and Wilks, 1994), this figure shows that use of the feminine form is extremely limited

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<sup>4</sup>The compte rendus are available for all sessions since 1958 at <http://archives.assemblee-nationale.fr>.

throughout the 1980s, and that Fabius’ language policy in 1986 had little to no effect on the speech of the politicians.



**Figure 1** – Proportion of uses of *Madame la N* vs *Madame le N* (1983-2005).

However, twelve years later, on March 6th 1998, the Socialist Prime Minister Lionel Jospin issued a statement (a *circulaire*) recalling to the government that they are supposed to be using feminine gender and (if appropriate) feminized forms. He acknowledged that the Fabius’ policy was never obeyed/enforced and commissioned a new study from the *Commission générale de terminologie et néologie*, which is published in June 1999 and ends up making very similar recommendations as the one in 1984-5 (Becquer et al., 1999). Figure 1 shows that, after this second wave of activism, the results are very different with use of the feminine form rising dramatically in 1997-98, around the time of Jospin’s statement.

The contrast between the mid 1980s and the mid 1990s is striking and raises the following question: *What changed from 1986 to 1998 which allowed the feminine form to take over, possibly aided by (the exact same) language policy?*

Our main claim in this paper is that changes in the use of feminine grammatical gender and differences in the effectiveness of Fabius/Jospin’s language policy are (indirectly) the result of changes in **gender ideologies** in France between the mid 1980s and mid 1990s. In particular, we argue that the mid 1990s saw the emergence of a new social type (or **persona** (Zhang, 2005; Podesva, 2007; Eckert, 2008, among others) for female politicians, which only feminine g-gender can construct. We hypothesize that Jospin’s reinforcement of Fabius’ policy in 1998 was successful because it strengthened an existing association between feminine g-gender and a female political persona; whereas, Fabius’ original policy was unsuccessful because it tried to build on ideological structure that was not shared by a large portion of the *Assemblée Nationale*. Our case study thus suggests that linguistic prescriptions will only be successful if they build on existing ideologies in the speech community and highlights the role that (non)linguistic discourses can play in the actuation

and spread of linguistic change.

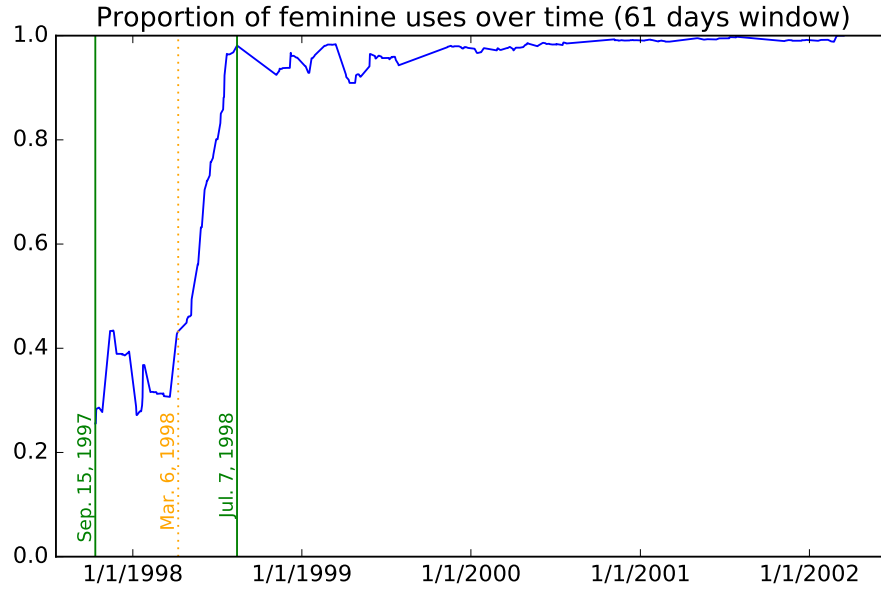
The paper is laid out as follows: in section 2, we go deeper into the *Assemblée Nationale* dataset and investigate which linguistic and social factors condition the rise of the feminine in the late 1990s. Then, in section 3, we argue that the linguistic change documented in section 2 coincides with an important social change: the emergence of a new stereotypically feminine persona for female politicians. Following research in French political history and social science, we describe the discursive construction of this new persona in the context of the *parité* debate on the equal representation of women and men in elected office. In section 4, we argue that the relationship between feminine g-gender and the new persona is mediated by the social meaning of grammatical gender marking in French. Following remarks by McConnell-Ginet (2013), we propose that the **social meaning** of French feminine g-gender marking makes it optimal for constructing the emerging stereotypically feminine persona, and thus we argue that the replacement of the masculine g-gender by feminine g-gender in the AN is a consequence of the social meaning of g-gender marking and changes in the way speakers in the AN conceptualize their fellow female politicians. To make these claims explicit, we develop a formal model of the relationship between ideological structure and social meaning by combining Gärdenfors (2000, 2014)’s *Conceptual Spaces* framework with Eckert (2008)’s analysis of social meaning as *indexical fields*. Finally, section 5 concludes with a general discussion of the role that social structure and speaker ideologies play in linguistic change.

## 2 Variation and change in the Assemblée Nationale

Based on Figure 1, we know that the change happened around 1996-1999; however, to properly understand its dynamics, we need to get a more fine-grained look at the linguistic and social factors that condition the changing use of *Madame le/la N*. In order to restrict our attention to the time period where there is variation for statistical analysis, we took the proportion of feminine uses on all the occurrences 30 days before and 30 days after each session. Tracking the change through a 61 day window is necessary because each session of the AN features few (if any) occurrences of a female term of address, so, with such small numbers, looking at the proportion of feminine vs masculine g-gender at each day is not enlightening.

Using this methodology, Figure 2 shows the rise of feminine g-gender in the 11th legislature. Based on this pattern, we will focus our quantitative study on the period between September 15th, 1997 (after the summer break) to July 7th, 1998 (the end of the spring session). Limiting the quantitative study to the 11th legislature allows us to study change within a single community of practice, since the membership of the Assemblée remains constant throughout this time period.

Within the period identified in Figure 2, we have 4 036 occurrences of female terms of



**Figure 2** – Replacement of masculine by feminine g-gender in the 11th legislature

address: 1779 feminine (*Madame **la** N*) and 2257 masculine (*Madame **le** N*), i.e. an overall rate of use of the feminine of 44%. We then coded these occurrences for the linguistic and social factors described below.

## 2.1 Linguistic factors

The main linguistic conditioning factor investigated in this paper is the identity of the function noun. In the introduction, we saw that *ministre* ‘ministre’ was one of the function nouns that participate in the g-gender alternation. The other nouns in our corpus that alternate are the following:<sup>5</sup>

- (10) Président(e) ‘President’
- a. **M. Thierry Mariani. Madame *le* président**, nous devons en principe disposer de cinq minutes après l’annonce du scrutin. Je n’ai pas eu le temps de regagner l’hémicycle ! (23/10/1996)
  - b. **M. Thierry Mariani. Madame *la* présidente de la commission**, qu’en sera-t-il des catégories de délinquants étrangers qui ont de gros problèmes de santé, etc. ? (16/12/1997)

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<sup>5</sup>For space reasons, we do not provide translations for the examples in this section, since their content is not important. What is important for our argument is the intra-speaker variation in gender marking of the noun phrases.

- (11) Secrétaire d'État 'Secretary of State'
- a. **M. Gilbert Meyer. Madame *le* secrétaire d'Etat aux petites entreprises**, au commerce et à l'artisanat, depuis le 1er janvier 1997 ... (3/03/1998)
  - b. **M. Gilbert Meyer. Madame *la* secrétaire d'Etat aux petites et moyennes entreprises**, au commerce et à l'artisanat, la loi relative au développement et à la promotion du commerce et de l'artisanat. . . (7/10/1997)
- (12) Député(e) 'Deputee'
- a. **M. Jean-Claude Gayssot. Madame *le* député**, si j'ai bien compris, mon prédécesseur vous avait fait des promesses d'engagement au printemps dernier. (24/10/1997)
  - b. **M. Jean-Claude Gayssot. Madame *la* députée**, comme vous le savez, le schéma directeur national des liaisons ferroviaires à grande vitesse, approuvé par décret en 1992, a prévu, pour la desserte de l'ouest de la France, la réalisation du TGV Bretagne. . . (24/10/1997)
- (13) Garde des sceaux 'Justice Minister'
- a. **M. Gérard Gouzes. Madame *le* garde des sceaux**, alors que nous débattons du budget de la justice pour 1998, tout le monde commente le retard accumulé année après année. . . (21/10/1997)
  - b. **M. Gérard Gouzes. Madame *la* garde des sceaux**, combien de temps nous faudra-t-il encore pour définir de manière simple, de manière transparente, de manière cohérente, la place de chacun des acteurs de l'acte judiciaire dans notre vieux pays ? . . . (02/06/1998)
- (14) Rapporteur/euse 'Rapporteur'
- a. **M. Pierre Mazeaud. Madame *le* rapporteur**, terminez, je vous en prie ! . . . (29/10/1997)
  - b. **M. Yves Cochet. Vous gênez M. Cacheux, madame *la* rapporteuse**. (02/06/1998)

The distribution of feminine g-gender by function noun is displayed in Table 1: the highest rates of *la* are found with *député(e)* and *président(e)*, and the lowest rate is found with *garde des sceaux*. Since there is only a single use of *rapporteuse* (14-b), we excluded this noun from the statistical analysis.

We note that the observed function noun hierarchy corresponds to the hierarchy of governmental power and prestige, so it is possible that associations between the masculine form and institutional power play a role in creating the distribution in Table 1; however, since our corpus does not feature very many different function nouns, this cannot be established with certainty. We therefore leave further exploration of the source of lexical effects in



NOUN	F	M	TOTAL	PROP. F
Deputé(e)	156	51	207	0.75
Président(e)	126	58	184	0.69
Secrétaire d'État	144	118	262	0.55
Ministre	1275	1657	2932	0.43
Garde des sceaux	77	335	412	0.19
Rapporteur/euse	1	38	39	0.03

**Table 1** – Distribution of grammatical gender by function noun

g-gender alternations to future research involving a more lexically diverse corpus.

## 2.2 Social factors

Given that we are studying the speech of politicians, it is natural to wonder whether speakers belonging to different political parties will show different patterns of use. Indeed, as shown in Table 2, there is a large difference in the use of the feminine between the more left wing parties (including the Socialists, the Communists and the Greens), who use the feminine around 63% of the time, and the right wing parties *Union pour la Démocratie Française* (UDF) and *Rassemblement pour la République* (RPR), who use the feminine in only 30% of the cases.

SPECTRUM	PARTY	F	M	TOTAL	PROP. F
Left	Communiste	183	108	291	0.63
	Socialiste	722	406	1128	0.64
	Vert	81	48	129	0.63
	MDC	42	17	59	0.71
	DVG	23	14	37	0.62
	PRS	33	36	69	0.48
	Total	1084	629	1713	0.63
Right	UDF	302	650	952	0.32
	RPR	368	941	1327	0.29
	Total	670	1591	2261	0.30
Other	Other	25	37	62	0.40

**Table 2** – Distribution of grammatical gender by political party.

In order to ensure that we have enough data for the statistical analysis, we will focus only on the larger political parties: the Communists (*Parti Communiste Français* (PCF)), the Socialists (*Parti socialiste* (PS)), UDF and RPR.

Since we are studying the use and interpretation of grammatical gender, it is also natural to wonder if there is some relation between the social gender of the speakers and their

SPECT.	PARTY	F	M	PROP. F
Left	Parti Communiste Français	183	108	0.63
	Parti Socialiste	722	406	0.64
Right	Union pour la Démocratie Française	302	650	0.32
	Rassemblement pour la République	368	941	0.29

**Table 3** – Grammatical gender use of major French political parties

use of the feminine in our corpus. In the 11th legislature, 10/35 members of the cabinet (*le gouvernement*) are female (29%), and 63/577 deputies of the AN are female (10.9%).<sup>6</sup> Furthermore, in our subcorpus, 55/404 speakers are women (13.6%).

As shown in Table 4, female politicians use slightly more feminine than male politicians in our corpus. However, since the proportion of female politicians is higher on the left, multivariate statistical analysis is required to disentangle the influence of speaker gender and political affiliation.

SPEAKER GENDER	F	M	Total	Prop. F
Female	397	318	715	0.55
Male	1382	1939	3321	0.42

**Table 4** – Distribution of grammatical gender by speaker social gender.

## 2.3 Statistical Analysis

The patterns described in the previous subsection suggest that g-gender variation in the 11th legislature may be subject to both linguistic and social conditioning factors; however, in order to properly assess their importance, we built **generalized linear mixed effects models** in R using the lme4 package (Bates et al., 2014), with **speaker identity** (363 speakers) as a random effect and the following fixed effects: **session date** (continuous), speaker **political party** (PCF, PS, UDF, RPR), speaker **social gender** (F, M), speaker **age** (continuous (based on birth date)) and **function noun** (président(e), député(e), ministre, secrétaire d’état, garde des sceaux).

The results of the statistical analysis are shown in Table 5: we find a significant effect of date, which is unsurprising given that change is very clearly in progress in 1997-1998. We also find a significant lexical effect of the function noun, with *président(e)* not being significantly different from *député(e)*, but the other nouns appearing with the masculine significantly more. As discussed above, it is not clear what to make of this pattern, so we

<sup>6</sup>Data on the composition of the 11th legislature is available at <http://archives.assemblee-nationale.fr/>.

	Estimate	Std. Error	z value	Pr(>  z )	
(Intercept)	-6.609679	0.355040	-18.62	< 2e-16	***
Session date	-3.457020	0.082100	-42.11	< 2e-16	***
Garde des sceaux	1.692526	0.220880	7.66	1.82e-14	***
Ministre	0.767964	0.198284	3.87	0.000107	***
Président(e)	-0.075609	0.262723	-0.29	0.773507	
Secrétaire d’État	0.946869	0.232061	4.08	4.50e-05	***
Socialist Party	-0.007641	0.248703	-0.03	0.975490	
RPR	1.292224	0.261221	4.95	7.54e-07	***
UDF	1.088865	0.259566	4.19	2.73e-05	***
Speaker gender (M)	0.308782	0.193789	1.59	0.111073	
Speaker birth date	-0.025583	0.063722	-0.40	0.688071	

**Table 5** – Fixed effects of the Generalized linear mixed model. Dependent variable: probability of masculine grammatical gender. Levels of independent variables in the intercept: Speaker gender F; Party PCF; Noun Deputé(e).

leave open whether or not it is generated by meaning/ideological considerations (as we will argue the other patterns are) or whether more grammatical or cognitive factors are at play.

With respect to the social factors: we found that neither speaker social gender nor speaker age were significant; however, political party was, with the Socialists behaving like the Communists, and the two right wing parties (UDF and RPR) differing significantly. This suggests that women’s slightly higher rate of use of the feminine shown in Table 4 is actually the result of left wing parties having more female members than right wing parties, rather than female politicians marking aspects of their gender class through language. Thus, we see that ideology (in this case, political ideology) is more important than demographics in our dataset.<sup>7</sup>

The fact that political party emerged as significant in the statistical analysis also shows that grammatical gender bears **social meaning**, at least in our dataset. In other words, from these results, we know that there must be at least some extra little bit of information that is communicated through the use of the feminine vs the masculine that makes speakers on the leftmost part of the political spectrum more likely to use it. A natural first hypothesis might be that, in the late 1990s, politicians in the AN are using grammatical gender in female terms of address to **mark** their political affiliation: *la* would mark membership in a left wing party and *le* would mark membership in a right wing party.

However, we argue that this simple hypothesis is insufficient for three reasons: firstly, it does not account for the homogeneity within left and right wing parties. For example, the Socialists, Communists and Greens often take great pains to create distinct party identities on the left; however, they all behave identically with respect to g-gender variation (Table

<sup>7</sup>This is a common finding in detailed sociolinguistic work (see Eckert, 1989, among others).

2). Likewise, if we supposed that the use of the feminine signalled the **degree** of political leftness of the speaker, we would expect to find a gradient pattern where the Communists to use significantly more feminine than the Socialists. However, as shown in the statistical analysis, this is not the case. Secondly, an analysis in which g-gender variation signals political affiliation does not immediately account for why this signalling is limited to the late 1990s: the major party distinctions shown in Table 2 and the political conflicts associated with these distinctions are largely maintained in 21st century (albeit in slightly different configurations), so, under this analysis, it is mysterious why the politicians stop using g-gender to mark their political party in 1999. Finally, we argue that a ‘g-gender as political marker’ analysis cannot account for the linguistic behaviour of the women of the most right wing party: RPR. As shown in Table 6, there are three RPR women who speak in our corpus. Two of them (Nicole Catala and Michèle Alliot-Marie) behave like their male colleagues, using the feminine at around 25% of the time; however, one (Roselyne Bachelot) has a rate of 84% and is one of the highest users of the feminine in the corpus.

SPEAKER	F	M	TOTAL	PROP. F
Roselyne Bachelot	87	17	104	0.84
Nicole Catala	27	86	113	0.24
Michèle Alliot-Marie	2	6	8	0.25

**Table 6** – Grammatical gender use by the women of the *Rassemblement pour la République*.

In other words, we would like to know: *What distinguishes Bachelot (on the one hand) from Catala and Alliot-Marie (on the other)?* We propose that the answer to this question lies in a study of changing gender ideologies in late 20th century France.

### 3 *Parité* and changing French gender ideologies

The extreme user of the feminine described in the previous section, Roselyne Bachelot, was a long time member of the Assemblée Nationale (1988-2012) and, during this time, she held a number of very important right wing party and governmental functions, including three ministerial portfolios (Ecology, Health and Solidarity) during the Chirac and Sarkozy presidencies. So it is extremely unlikely that she would be using feminine grammatical gender to indicate some disaffiliation with her political party. This being said, Bachelot does differ from many of her RPR colleagues in that she is one of the most prominent supporters of the *parité* political movement. Indeed, at the time of the change studied in this paper (1995-1998) she was head of the *Observatoire sur la parité entre les hommes et les femmes*<sup>8</sup> and she supervises the report *La parité dans la vie publique*,<sup>9</sup> a study of the situation of women in politics, published in December 1996.

<sup>8</sup>Center for *parité* between men and women.

<sup>9</sup>*Parité* in public life.

### 3.1 The *parité* movement

Used in this context, the French word *parité* refers to both a philosophical position (Gaspard et al., 1992) and a political movement aimed at ensuring that men and women have equal access to electoral mandates and elected office. It was a very successful political movement in the late 1990s, and its success continues in the 21st century. Its earliest legislative successes date to around the time of the linguistic change described in section 2. For example, on **June 19th, 1997** (at the very beginning of the change) Prime Minister Jospin announces his intention to amend the constitution and pass a law making *parité* a goal for the government. As shown above, most of the members of the Assemblée Nationale shift from using *Madame le N* to *Madame la N* directly after: from Fall 1997-Summer 1998. Then, on **June 17th, 1998**, the first draft of the bill to amend the constitution to include the statement *La loi favorise l'égal accès des femmes et hommes aux mandats et fonctions*<sup>10</sup> is formulated, and on **July 8th, 1999**, Jospin's constitutional amendment passes. The first *parité* law passes on **June 6th, 2000**, and, during the years 2000-2014, many other pro-*parité* laws are passed aimed at enforcing equal representation in both government and educational institutions. Since the rise of the *parité* socio-political movement **coincides** with the rise of the use of feminine g-gender in the AN, we conclude that it is highly likely some aspect of support for *parité* played a role in the actuation of the change.

A second argument that the rise of the feminine is related to the *parité* movement comes from the way in which support for this movement propagated through the Assemblée Nationale. As documented in (Bereni, 2007, chapter 6), prior to 1995, pro-*parité* positions were almost exclusively held publicly by politicians on the radical left: the Greens, the Communists and the *Mouvement des citoyens* party (Bereni, 2007, 343). However, in 1996-1997, support grew within the Socialist party, largely as part of a democratic renewal project headed by Lionel Jospin. (Bereni, 2007, 402) says,<sup>11</sup>

le Parti socialiste entame à partir de 1996 un tournant majeur au regard de la place accordée dans son programme à la question de la représentation politique des femmes. Sous l'impulsion de la nouvelle direction menée par Lionel Jospin, le parti fait du thème de la parité – étroitement lié à celui de la “rénovation démocratique” – l'une des dimensions de sa stratégie de reconquête électorale.

On the other hand, with the exception of Bachelot, who (Bereni, 2007, 374) calls the *avocate esseulée de la parité au RPR*,<sup>12</sup> right wing deputies were largely hostile to the proposal of a constitutional amendment in favour of gender-balanced electoral representation in this period. However, the year 1997-1998 saw a major increase in support for *parité* across the

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<sup>10</sup> *The law promotes equal access to mandates and functions by women and men.*

<sup>11</sup> *The socialist party undertook starting in 1996 a major turn with respect to the place devoted to the question of political representation of women in its program. Under the impulse of the new direction led by Lionel Jospin, the party made the theme of parité – closely linked to that of “democratic renewal” – one of their major reelection strategies.*

<sup>12</sup> *RPR's solitary parité advocate.*

body of the Assemblée Nationale. An important turning point for the right was on **March 23rd 1998**, when right wing President Jacques Chirac publicly announced his support for Jospin's proposed constitutional amendment, and then, as (Bereni, 2007, 405) describes,

À partir de la seconde moitié de l'année 1998, [...] un consensus forcé sur l'opportunité d'une réforme constitutionnelle en matière de parité semble s'installer dans le champ politique : il paraît en tout cas de plus en plus difficile de s'exprimer ouvertement contre ce projet sans apparaître comme réticent à la dynamique de rénovation politique voulue non seulement par les deux têtes de l'exécutif mais aussi par "l'opinion".<sup>13</sup>

Finally, when the time came to pass the constitutional amendment in the summer of 1999, it passed with 94% support from both left wing and right wing politicians.

### 3.2 The emergence of the feminine politician persona

The *parité* movement was both accompanied and invigorated by enormous attention from the press. Media debates about electoral quotas began in 1993 with Servan-Schreiber and Gaspard (1993) and Viennot (1993), and were at their most intense in the winters of 1996 and 1999 (Ramsay, 2003; Julliard, 2012). As observed by (Freedman, 1997; Garréta, 2001; Scott, 2005, among others), and documented in great detail by Julliard (2012), this coverage was characterized by the appearance of new discourses surrounding the nature, behaviour and social position of female politicians. Following the aforementioned authors, we argue that these discourses were instrumental in constructing a new *persona* (identity or social type) for women in politics. In section 4, we will argue that this new feminine political persona is the key to understanding the actuation of the change studied in section 2.

Although most advocates of *parité* legislation consider themselves feminist, not all feminists supported the *parité* movement. In fact, as discussed in Sintomer (2007), the most influential *paritaristes* ('pro-*parité* activists') came from three main ideological camps: essentialist differentialist feminists, republican paritaristes, and pragmatic egalitarians (Sintomer, 2007, 151).<sup>14</sup> The differentialist feminists were extremely influential in both politics and the press, in part because one their main figures was the philosopher Sylvie Agacinski-Jospin, wife of the Prime Minister (Scott, 2005; Bereni, 2007; Julliard, 2012). Based on psycho-analytic principles, Agacinski (1998, 1999) and the well-known philosopher Julia Kristeva

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<sup>13</sup>Starting from the second half of the year 1998, [...] a consensus forced by the opportunity of a constitutional reform based on *parité* seemed to settle in into the political landscape: in any case, it seemed more and more difficult to openly express oneself against this project without appearing reticent towards the political renewal dynamic, which was wanted not only by the two heads of the executive [Chirac and Jospin] but also by public opinion.

<sup>14</sup>Note that there were also significant groups of feminists, such as the radical deconstructionists and republican universalists (to be discussed below) who were against *parité* legislation. See Sintomer (2007); Scott (2005) for an overview of the ideological landscape of the *parité* debate.

(Kristeva, 1999) argued that men and women constitute two fundamentally different kinds of citizens; therefore, electoral quotas are legitimate to ensure that these two basic parts of French society are democratically represented.

For example, arguing against *l'effacement des sexes* 'the erasure of the sexes', Agacinski (1999) says (p.4),

L'effacement "français" procède en noyant les deux sexes dans un humanisme abstrait d'où surnage le modèle unique d'un être humain sexuellement neutre. L'effacement "américain" procède en noyant les femmes dans un particularisme généralisé où se retrouvent des minorités de toutes sortes (ethniques, religieuses, culturelles, etc.), et les deux sexes finissent par être considérés comme de pures "constructions", quand ils ne sont pas la conséquence de modèles culturels hétérosexuels ("heterosexual matrix"), comme chez Judith Butler.

Le nouveau féminisme français récuse à la fois ces deux types de neutralisation des sexes en affirmant la dualité sexuelle comme la seule différence universelle au sein de l'humanité. C'est pourquoi il a pu concevoir l'idéal de la parité en politique.<sup>15</sup>

This line of argumentation, defended by very powerful public intellectuals, constructs "the female politician" as a distinct type of politician from "the male politician." Since, before the public debates on *parité*, female politicians had been viewed as subtypes of male politicians, Agacinski argues (p.6) that "L'idéal ne fut donc plus de devenir des hommes comme les autres, mais d'affirmer la différence dans l'égalité".<sup>16</sup>

Although the republican paritaristes and pragmatic egalitarians were less essentialist than the differentialists, these activists also constructed male and female politicians as qualitatively distinct. In particular, one of their principal arguments in favor of electoral quotas was that including more women in government would have a positive effect on France, since (by nature or by material circumstance) female politicians have different properties and view the world differently than do male politicians (Freedman, 1997; Scott, 2005; Sintomer, 2007; Achin et al., 2007; Julliard, 2012, among others). As Achin et al. (2007) describes (p.10),

C'est ainsi que la presse, les partis, les dirigeants politiques, ainsi que de nombreux femmes, ont avancé l'idée que les femmes font "de la politique autrement"

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<sup>15</sup> "French" erasure proceeds through drowning both sexes in an abstract humanism over which floats the unique model of a sexually neutral human being. "American" erasure proceeds through drowning women in a generalized particularism where are found minorities of all sorts (ethnic, religious, cultural etc.), and the two sexes finish by being considered "constructions", when they are not the consequence of heterosexual cultural models ("heterosexual matrix"), as with Judith Butler.

The new French feminism refuses both of these erasures at the same time through affirming sexual duality as the only universal difference at the heart of humanity. This is why it was able to conceive of the ideal of political *parité*.

<sup>16</sup> The ideal was no longer to become men like everyone else, but to affirm difference in equality.

de manière à justifier la réforme. La féminisation des assemblées est supposée ds lors augmenter le pragmatisme du personnel politique par le simple fait de l'attachement supposé des femmes aux questions matérielles et quotidiennes de l'existence. [...] La féminisation du personnel politique devrait enfin renouer le lien brisé entre gouvernants et gouvernés grâce à la capacité d'écoute des femmes, leur appétence pour les domaines sociaux, pour le service aux personnes (enfants, personnes âgées, handicapés, etc.) et, *a contrario*, leur moindre intérêt pour les considérations partisans et politiciennes, les dossiers purement techniques, les longues prises de parole et les relations violentes et conflictuelles.<sup>17</sup>

The theme that female politicians are distinct from male politicians because they are more concrete-thinking, more sensitive and more honest runs through *parité* debate in the press from 1996-1999. For example, one of the most important documents in this debate was the *Manifeste des dix*: a pro-parité 'manifesto' published in *L'express* on June 6th, 1996 by 10 current and former female ministers (Barzach, Bredin, Cresson, Gisserot, Lalumière, Neiertz, Pelletier, Roudy, Tasca, and Veil). This manifesto was very important because it presented the first united front between high profile left wing politicians (such as Yvette Roudy) and right wing politicians (such as Simone Veil).<sup>18</sup> Again, this text proposes that women's (stereotypically) feminine qualities constitute an argument for increasing their representation in the Assemblée Nationale (Scott, 2005):

Noyau de notre culture républicaine, pas toujours démocratique, le jacobinisme a d'abord et surtout été une affaire d'hommes. [...] Centralisateur et hiérarchique, donneur de leçons et arrogant autant qu'éducateur, rhétorique et rationaliste jusqu'à l'abstraction chimérique, le jacobinisme est en quelque sorte un concentré de qualités viriles [...] La relation aux autres tels qu'ils sont, la sensibilité, le concret, le souci du quotidien étaient ainsi rejetés du champ politique. Et les femmes avec.<sup>19</sup>

At the same time that male and female politicians were being differentiated in the press, the female politician persona, as distinct from the male politician, was also being constructed

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<sup>17</sup>In this way the press, the parties, the political leaders, as well as many women, advanced the idea that women "do politics differently" as a way to justify the reform. The feminisation of the assemblies will apparently increase the pragmatism of the political personnel by the simple fact of women's attachment to material questions and issues of daily life. [...] The feminisation of political personnel would apparently finally repair the broken link between the governors and the governed thanks to women's listening abilities, their yearning for social domains, for service to people (children, the elderly, the disabled, etc.) and, *a contrario*, their limited interest for partisan and politician considerations, purely technical dossiers, longwinded turns and violent and conflictual relations.

<sup>18</sup>Although, as described in the previous section, it would take another year for the rightwing members of the AN to largely come around to the idea of electoral quotas.

<sup>19</sup>Center of our republican culture, not always democratic, Jacobinism was first and foremost a male business. [...] Centralizing and hierarchical, as pedantic and arrogant as educational, rhetorical and rationalistic up to the point of chimerical abstraction, Jacobinism is in some way a concentration of virile qualities [...] Relating to others as they are, sensitivity, concreteness, caring for everyday things were thus rejected from the political realm. And women with them.



in literature in the mid/late 1990s. Although there were certain early works describing the life of female politicians, such as Huguette Bouchardeau's 1988 book *Choses dites de profil*, the number of new biographical and autobiographical studies documenting female politicians' personal experiences exploded after 1995, constituting a whole new literary genre in the late 90s (Freedman, 1998; Ramsay, 2003). A sample of works detailing what it was like to be a female politician at the time of the *parité* debates is shown in (15).

- (15)
1. Roudy, Y. (1995). *Mais de quoi ont-ils peur?: Un vent de misogynie souffle sur la politique*. Editions Albin Michel.
  2. Royal, S. (1996). *La vérité d'une femme*. Stock.
  3. Bredin, F. (1997). *Députée: journal de bord*. Fayard.
  4. Guigou, E. (1997). *Être femme en politique*. Plon.
  5. Halimi, G. (1997). *La nouvelle cause des femmes*. Seuil.
  6. Lepage, C. (1998). *On ne peut rien faire, Madame le ministre...* Albin Michel.
  7. Bachelot, R., & Fraisse, G. (1999). *Deux femmes au royaume des hommes*. Hachette Littératures.

According to Ramsay's (2003) study of this new literary genre, "many of the texts in the emerging new body of studies by and on political women [...] share aspects of Bouchardeau's exploration of subjective understandings (or fictions) of political life from the particular perspective of women. They focus on values, emotions or identity." Ramsay therefore proposes that "these texts work to constitute and legitimate a rethinking and a 'rewriting' of traditional political history and help construct the unique yet multiple identity of the political women" (Ramsay, 2003, xiv).

A final argument in favour of the development of a new stereotypically feminine persona in the late 1990s comes from the shape of feminist reactions **against** the *parité* movement. In the same way that pro-*parité* feminists argued that male and female politicians' differences would positively impact France, many anti-*parité* feminists criticized the claim that men and women differ in properties like *pragmatism*, *sensitivity* and *honesty*. For example, the philosopher Elisabeth Badinter (Badinter, 1996, 1999, 2003) objects that "le Manifeste de la parité entérine les caractéristiques féminines les plus éculées,<sup>20</sup>" (Badinter, 1996, 4), and she denies that female and male politicians differ qualitatively in their properties, saying (p.4)

A qui fera-t-on croire que les femmes politiques ont moins d'ambition que leurs homologues masculins? Et au nom de quoi peuvent-elles se prévaloir de faire de la politique "autrement"? Pour ma part, je ne vois aucune différence entre un ministre ou premier ministre féminin et masculin. [...] En vérité, les avocates de la parité ne tentent pas seulement de nous faire croire qu[e les femmes] sont essentiellement différentes des hommes, mais aussi qu'elles sont meilleures qu'eux. Avec elles, la politique si décriée deviendrait enfin plus humaine, plus

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<sup>20</sup> *The parité manifesto endorses the most tired female stereotypes.*

chaleureuse et plus efficace. Pardon d’être sceptique, mais, à côtoyer les femmes de pouvoir, je les trouve très semblables à leurs collègues masculins : mêmes qualités, mêmes défauts.<sup>21</sup>

Thus, in this time period, we see two opposing visions of the nature of female politicians: one in which they are characterized by “feminine” qualities, advocated for by the paritaristes, and one in which, for better or for worse, they display the same properties as their male colleagues.<sup>22</sup> In what follows, we will refer to the stereotypically female persona as the **feminine persona** and, following Badinter’s articulation, we will refer to the less feminine persona as the **universalist persona**.

In summary, in this section, we argued that the social context in which Fabius’ language policy was implemented was very different from the social context in which Jospin reiterated this policy. Before 1995, there were few women in the Assemblée Nationale (only around 6% of the deputies were female), and there were few public records of life as a female politician. Although there was some discussion of the place of women in politics in the press, this discussion was rather limited, and, prior to 1999, there were no formal institutional divisions between men and women in politics. Then, in the middle of the 1990s, there were twice as many women in the AN (11% in 1997); female politician writing became a new literary genre; and the place of women in politics became a common topic in the press. Finally, after the passing of the *parité* amendment and laws, differences between men and women become formally encoded into the structure of governmental and educational institutions. We therefore propose that the particular combination of an increase in female representation in the AN and, most importantly, discourses about this representation<sup>23</sup> contributed to establishing a new identity for female politicians: a **stereotypically feminine political persona**.

### 3.3 Linguistic manifestations of persona construction

In the previous section, we argued that, in the late 1990s, there were two principal personae available for female politicians: a new stereotypically feminine one and an older *universalist*

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<sup>21</sup> *Who is going to believe that female politicians have less ambition than their male counterparts? And for what reason are they likely to do politics “differently”? Personally, I don’t see any difference between a male and female minister or prime minister. [...] In reality, the parité advocates not only want to make us believe that [women] are essentially different than men, but also that they are better than them. With them, much criticized politics would finally become more humane, warmer and more efficient. Excuse me for being skeptical, but, from spending time with powerful women, I find them very similar to their male colleagues: same qualities, same faults.*

<sup>22</sup> Of course, some political figures in the 1990s also articulate a third vision: one in which there are simply no (or few) female politicians, i.e. the anti-feminist position (see Scott, 2005).

<sup>23</sup> Indeed, the salience of the question of gender balance in electoral representation was most likely triggered around this time by the formation of the European Union and the ensuing realization of France’s poor standing among European countries with respect to gender equality in politics. We thank Anne F. Garréta for bringing this to our attention.

persona that is more similar to male political personae. In this section, we suggest that speakers in the Assemblée Nationale in 1997-1998 use grammatical gender in their construction of these different personae. Our quantitative data is limited by who happens to talk publicly in the AN, and for how long; therefore, sadly, data for individuals speakers is often quite sparse. Nevertheless, we believe that the patterns described below suggest a link between feminine g-gender use and feminine persona construction, and (for women) masculine g-gender use and masculine persona construction.

Returning to one of the highest users of the feminine in our corpus, Roselyne Bachelot (85%), we can observe that not only is she a principal advocate of *parité*, but she also cultivates an extreme feminine style. In a study of the gender presentation of Bachelot and her fellow powerful female right wing colleague, Michèle Alliot-Marie, (Bard, 2012, 10) remarks on how Bachelot's manner of dressing is designed to distinguish her from her male colleagues:

Roselyne Bachelot théorise le recours à la couleur vive d'une manière féministe. Elle privilégie le rose, une couleur archiféminine. Manière pour elle d'arborer la féminité comme un drapeau, dans un monde d'hommes, de jouer d'une différence devenue très visible.<sup>24</sup>

Bachelot very publicly espouses the “feminine” properties of *pragmatism*, *sensitivity*, *honesty* etc., which she argues women will bring to politics. For example, in a 1986 interview<sup>25</sup>), she says,

Je crois que la femme a un message de femme à apporter. Moi j'avoue que quand je vois quelque chose qui me fait pleurer, j'ose pleurer. Je suis quelqu'un de sensible; je ne veux pas devenir un homme manqué dans la politique. C'est ça que je veux apporter au monde politique.<sup>26</sup>

Alliot-Marie, on the other hand, very clearly constructs the less feminine political persona (Ramsay, 2003; Bard, 2012). According to (Bard, 2012, 10), “Michèle Alliot-Marie incarne un type de féminité autoritaire, raide, évocatrice du masculin”. She holds a similar anti-*parité* feminist position to Badinter, and is likewise skeptical about qualitative differences between men and women, saying in a recent interview with *Le Lab* about electoral quotas: “Ce que je dis est que les femmes ont les mêmes capacités que les hommes, qu'elles ont la même intelligence”.<sup>27</sup> Additionally, she does not have a particularly feminine way of

<sup>24</sup>Roselyne Bachelot theorizes the use of bright colours in a feminist manner. She privileges pink, an ultra feminine colour. A way for her to fly femininity like a flag, in a world of men, to take advantage of a difference that had become very visible.

<sup>25</sup>Video archives of the 1986 elections by the *Institut National de l'Audiovisuel*, available at <http://www.ina.fr/video/VDD10008113>.

<sup>26</sup>I think that women have a woman's message to bring. Me, I admit that when I see something that makes me cry, I dare to cry. I am a sensitive person; I don't want to be a failed man [tomboy] in politics. That's what I want to bring to the political world.

<sup>27</sup>“pol”, political interview show of the French Huffington Post, February 9, 2017; available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u5Sm8rhnc9s&t=1s>

dressing, and once remarked to a colleague who wanted her to change her hair and glasses: “Je ne suis pas potiche.”<sup>28</sup> (Bard, 2012, 11). Unfortunately for us, she does not talk very much in 1997-1998; however, it is suggestive that she uses feminine g-gender only 25% of the time (2/8 occurrences)

Previous work in political science has studied differences in gender presentation between the right wing politicians Bachelot and Alliot-Marie; however, a similar comparison has also been drawn among left wing politicians Ségolène Royal and Martine Aubry. Royal and Aubry appear to show the same basic pattern as Bachelot and Alliot-Marie, respectively. For example, Montini (2017) reports that:

Marine Aubry est présentée comme sérieuse, austère, si ce n’est pas autoritaire et froide. [...] Miroir inversé de Ségolène Royal, enfermée dans un excès de “féminité” (coquette, dans l’extrême émotion, imprévisible, voire folle etc.), Martine Aubry se trouve ramenée à une manque de “féminité”.<sup>29</sup>

(Ramsay, 2003, 197) also reports that “descriptive epithets from the period of [Aubry’s] entry into government generally attribute masculine qualities to this political woman called a “superwoman” and seen to possess “authority”, “moral intransigence”, “frankness”, “acerbic humour” and “the determination of a bulldozer.” Furthermore, unlike Royal who was one of *parité*’s earliest advocates within the Socialist party, Aubry was one of the last Socialist women to publicly support the constitutional amendment (Bereni, 2007). In particular, “contrairement à d’autres femmes de l’élite socialiste – comme Elisabeth Guigou ou Ségolène Royal – Martine Aubry tend à maintenir à distance son identité de “femme politique”, et s’est jusque-là [1997] peu exprimée sur les questions féministes” (Bereni, 2007, 419).<sup>30</sup>

Accordingly, although there is a correlation between political affiliation and the likelihood of adopting one or the other persona, we expect the use of g-gender to depend on the persona adopted by the speaker, quite independently of their political affiliation. This is indeed what we find when we examine the usage of Bachelot, Alliot-Marie, Royal and Aubry, summarized in Table 7. We find significant differences between Royal and Aubry’s use of the feminine (Fisher’s exact test,  $p$ -value  $< 0,001$ ) just as between Bachelot and Allio-Marie’s use (Fisher’s exact test,  $p$ -value  $< 0,05$ ). On the other hand there is no significant betwee Royal and Bachelot, or Aubry and Alliot-Marie.

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<sup>28</sup>*I am not a bimbo.*

<sup>29</sup>*Martine Aubry is presented as serious, austere if not authoritarian and cold. [...] Mirror image of Ségolène Royal, covered in an excess of “femininity” (coquette, extremely emotional, unpredictable, even crazy etc.). Martine Aubry finds herself brought back to a lack of “femininity”.*

<sup>30</sup>*contrary to other women of the Socialist elite-like Elisabeth Guigou or Ségolène Royal– Martine Aubry tends to maintain a distance from her “political woman” identity, and, up to that point [1997], had expressed herself very little on feminist issues.*

PERSONA	SPEAKER	F	M	TOTAL	PROP. F
Feminine	Roselyne Bachelot (RPR)	87	17	104	0.84
	Ségolène Royal (PS)	14	2	16	0.88
Universalist	Michèle Alliot-Marie (RPR)	2	6	8	0.25
	Martine Aubry (PS)	43	39	82	0.52

**Table 7** – Grammatical gender use by Bachelot, Alliot-Marie, Royal and Aubry.

## 4 Grammatical gender and social meaning

In the previous section, we argued that, in 1997-1998, there was a link between use of *Madame la N* and the construction of the feminine persona and the use of *Madame le N* and the construction of the universalist persona. However, we have not yet said anything about why this particular pairing of linguistic form and abstract identity should arise. In this section, we argue that identity construction with g-gender is mediated by the **social meanings** of feminine and masculine g-gender, in particular, the shape of the *indexical fields* (Eckert, 2008) of these variants.

The question of meaning in relation to grammatical gender marking has long been a controversial one. The view of the influential Académie Française is that there is no meaning associated with masculine or feminine marking. They say (1984, 2014),

En français, la marque du féminin ne sert qu’accessoirement à rendre la distinction entre mâle et femelle. La distribution des substantifs en deux genres institue [...] un principe de classification permettant éventuellement de distinguer des homonymes [etc. ...] Tous ces emplois du genre grammatical constituent un réseau complexe où la désignation contrastée des sexes ne joue qu’un rôle mineur.<sup>31</sup>

Nevertheless, the dominant view emerging in the fields of linguistics and psychology (which we will adopt in this paper) is that grammatical gender assignment is **multi-factorial**: it takes into account a variety of linguistic, cognitive and meaning-related factors (Tucker et al., 1977; Corbett, 1991; Dahl, 2000; McConnell-Ginet, 2013; Bonami and Boyé, 2017; Culbertson et al., 2017, and many others). With respect to linguistic factors, the shape of certain nominal endings may induce a strong preference for masculine or feminine g-gender (Tucker et al., 1977; Holmes and Segui, 2004, 2006; Matthews, 2010). Indeed, perhaps this is why the noun *rapporteur* lags behind the other function nouns in the change, since the *-eur* suffix is a strong cue for masculine g-gender. Furthermore, we know that cognitive factors like frequency may induce a strong preference for masculine or feminine g-gender (see also Dye et al., 2017). Perhaps this is why the highly frequent noun *personne* mentioned

<sup>31</sup> *In French, feminine marking only incidentally serves to create the distinction between male and female. The distribution of nouns of both genders institutes [...] a principle of classification which eventually allows one to distinguish homonyms [etc. ...] All these uses of grammatical gender constitute a complex network where contrastive reference to the sexes only plays a minor role.*

in section 1 so strongly prefers to be feminine (*\*le personne*). However, we propose that, at least for human nouns, there is a non-arbitrary relation between a noun’s g-gender and its meaning.

At the same time, specifying the interpretation of grammatical gender marking presents a puzzle. On the one hand, (pace Académie Française) there is clearly some link between grammatical gender and social gender interpretation. It is a robust generalization from psycholinguistic studies that, at least when minimal context is provided, masculine g-gender most often triggers reference to socially male individuals. This has been shown through a variety of association tasks (Brauer and Landry, 2008; Chatard et al., 2005; Gygax et al., 2012), possible continuation tasks (Gygax et al., 2008; Sato et al., 2013), eye tracking experiments (Irmen and Schumann, 2011), and can also be seen in the interpretation of neologisms (Bonami and Boyé, 2017).<sup>32</sup> So a theory of the meaning of g-gender marking must take into account the existence of a relationship between masculine g-gender and male social gender and feminine grammatical gender and female social gender.

On the other hand, it is clear that social gender is not part of the literal semantic meaning of grammatical gender marking. This can be seen from the very phenomenon that we are studying: although some speakers disprefer it, it is not contradictory to utter *Madame le ministre*.<sup>33</sup>

The solution to this puzzle that we will adopt in this paper follows remarks made by McConnell-Ginet (2013). We propose that, although g-gender is not semantically meaningful, its social meaning is related to social gender. Indeed, it is this social meaning that creates the political stratificational patterns described in section 2. More specifically, we propose that masculine g-gender is associated with (or, in the words of Silverstein (1976); Ochs (1992), *indexes*) sets of properties. Following Eckert (2008), we call these sets of properties *indexical fields*, and we notate the indexation relation using the  $[\cdot]$  symbol shown in (16). When a gender marked noun phrase is used in context, a subset of the properties in the field indexed by the noun phrase’s grammatical gender will be attributed to its referent; however, which subset ends up being attributed will change depending on the utterance context.

- (16) Indexical fields associated with French grammatical gender marking on human nouns<sup>34</sup>

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<sup>32</sup>See Gygax et al. (2013) for a review of the psycholinguistic literature on the interpretation of French g-gender.

<sup>33</sup>Furthermore, the use of the masculine in our corpus cannot simply be due to metaphor or ‘speaker reference’ (Donnellan, 1966), since the title (*Madame*) itself does not vary: unless they are genuinely being used metaphorically, *Monsieur le ministre* must pick out a man and *Madame le ministre* must pick out a woman.

<sup>34</sup>In this paper, we limit our analysis to the social meaning of grammatical gender marking on human denoting nouns, remaining agnostic with respect to whether the analysis in (16) should also be extended to non-human denoting nouns. Some psycholinguistic studies, such as ?, suggest that g-gender marking on inanimates may also be associated with sets of such properties; however, we leave application of this

- a. [F] = {pragmatic, sensitive, honest, non-dominant...}
- b. [M] = {abstract, tough, dishonest, dominant...}

To capture the indirect link between grammatical and social gender, we propose that the indexical field of feminine g-gender consists of properties stereotypically associated with women (16-a) and that the indexical field associated with masculine g-gender consists of properties stereotypically associated with men (16-b). Thus, the social gender inference found in uses of masculine and feminine nouns in minimal context arises as an implicature.

Although establishing with certainty which exact properties are in masculine and feminine's indexical fields requires detailed experimental work (for example, along the lines of Campbell-Kibler, 2007; Levon, 2014; Podesva et al., 2015, among others), the discourses described in section 3 suggest that properties such as *pragmatic*, *sensitive* and *honest* should be included in [F], while *abstract*, *tough* and *dishonest* should be included in [M].

In addition to the properties explicitly mentioned in the discourses surrounding *parité*, we include in the indexical fields a dimension related to **dominance** and, in particular, institutional dominance. Dominance is one of the main cultural discourses associated with masculinity in the North America and Europe (Connell, 1987; Whitehead, 2002; Kiesling, 2007), and it has also been argued to be a constitutive part of masculinity in France in the late 1990s by Bourdieu (1998).

We argue that the rise of feminine grammatical gender in the Assemblée Nationale in the late 1990s is predictable from the rise of the feminine political persona described in section 3 and the indexical fields proposed (16) under certain basic assumptions concerning how social changes are related to linguistic changes:

1. Social changes and discourse about them construct and change speaker/listener ideologies (Foucault, 1976; Butler, 1993, 1997; Livia and Hall, 1997, among many others).
2. Speaker/listener ideologies constrain what truth-conditional and social meanings can be assigned to linguistic expressions (Silverstein, 1979, 2003; Irvine and Gal, 2000, among many others).
3. An expression's truth-conditional and/or social meaning is what primarily drives its use.

## 4.1 Linking ideology and meaning with conceptual spaces

In order illustrate how our account of the relationship between persona change and language change works more explicitly, we will make use of formal tools from lexical semantics:

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analysis to non-human nouns to future research.

Gärdenfors (2000, 2014)’s *Conceptual Spaces* framework.<sup>35</sup> In this approach speaker and listener conceptual and ideological structures are represented as  $n$ -dimensional vector spaces. In this article, we propose that sociolinguistic variants are interpreted into these vector spaces whose dimensions are found in their indexical fields. Thus, for the analysis of the social meaning of French g-gender, we have the dimensions in (17). This being said, for ease of visualisation, we will limit our illustration to a three dimensional space consisting of *Institutional dominance*, *Abstraction* and *Toughness*.

(17) **4 dimensions of ideological space**

- a. Institutional dominance (dominant  $\leftrightarrow$  non-dominant)
- b. Abstraction (abstract  $\leftrightarrow$  pragmatic)
- c. Toughness (tough  $\leftrightarrow$  sensitive)
- d. Honesty (dishonest  $\leftrightarrow$  honest)

We propose that personae are represented as points within this space according to their properties,<sup>36</sup> and changes in speakers and listeners’ ideological structure will be modelled as changes in how personae are distributed across the ideological space.

For example, suppose we consider most politicians’ ideological structures in 1986, i.e. when Fabius formulated the first language policy. We argued above that there was a very tight correlation in the minds of politicians between institutional dominance, abstraction and toughness at this time, and we can represent this as a correlation between values on the different dimensions. Of course we do not know exactly how many personae a speaker represents and how exactly they are arranged in the ideological space, so as a demonstration of how the framework works, we generated 20 points in the conceptual space such that 10 occupy the higher two thirds of the space on the dominance, abstraction, and toughness scales, while 10 occupy the lower two thirds of the space, using the *rand* function in Octave (Eaton et al., 2015). Thus, we propose that most politicians in the AN have an ideological structure similar to that found in Figure 3 in 1986.

Observe that there are some significant empty spaces in the cube shown in Figure 3. Most importantly, no personae are highly dominant, very pragmatic and also very sensitive in this model.

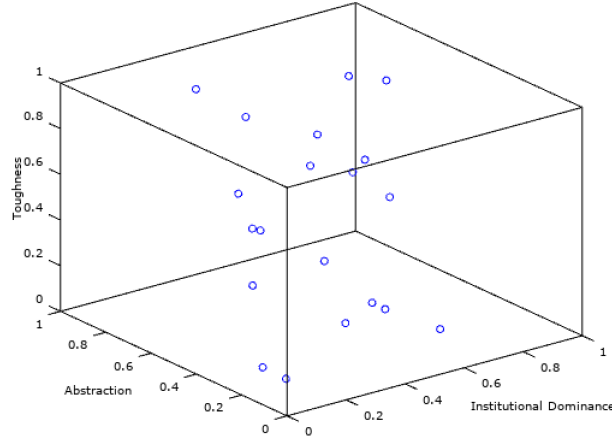
Both the truth conditional and social meanings of linguistic expressions pick out regions (or ‘chunks’) of the ideological space, and speakers use their language to communicate information about the location of the individual that they are talking about. Following Gärdenfors, we assume that the arrangement of personae in the space imposes constraints on which chunks noun phrases like *le ministre* and *la ministre* can identify. More specifically, the personae naturally partition the ideological space into the regions composed of

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<sup>35</sup>Our discussion in this paper will remain at an informal level; however, all pertinent mathematical definitions used can be found in Gärdenfors (2000).

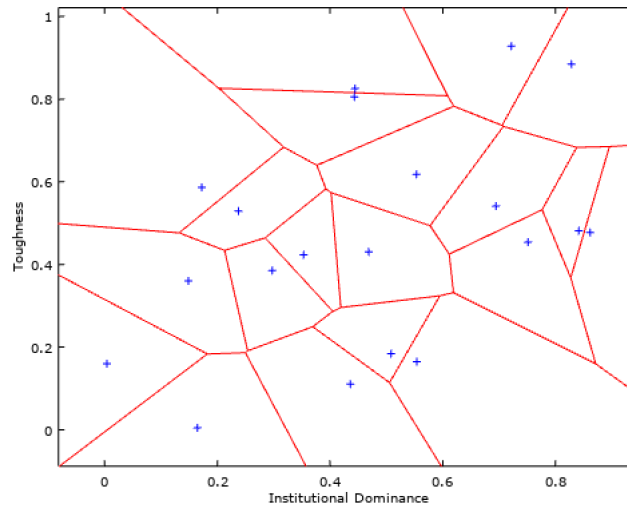
<sup>36</sup>For readers familiar with the Conceptual Spaces framework, our personae will play the role of Gärdenfors’ *prototypes*.





**Figure 3** – Dominant politician ideological structure in the 1980s and early 1990s

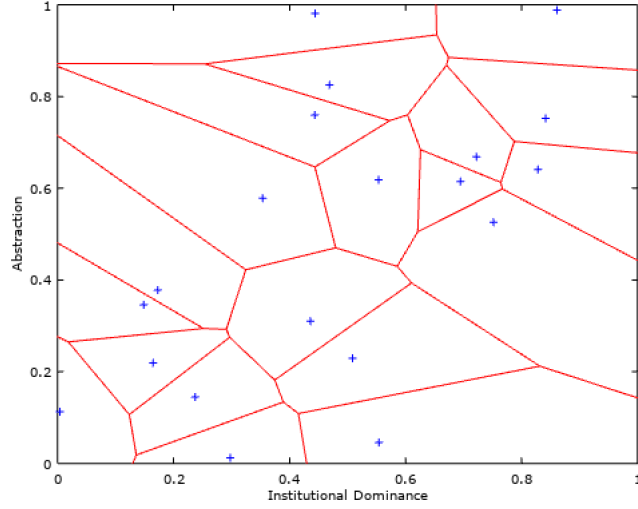
the points that lie closer to each persona than to any other persona.<sup>37</sup> Thus, the regions associated with each persona in the 1986 model are shown (in two dimensions for readability) in Figures 4 and 5.



**Figure 4** – Ideological space : Dominance vs Toughness

Crucially, in this model, individuals that are both highly institutionally dominant and very sensitive fall within the ideological region of a less dominant persona (Figure 4). Likewise, highly dominant and very pragmatic individuals are obligatorily grouped into the region defined by the less dominant persona (Figure 5).

<sup>37</sup>More technically, each region associated with a persona is called its *voronoi polygon* and all the polygons taken together constitute the *voronoi tessellation* of the ideological space. All the tessellations in this paper were calculated using Octave.



**Figure 5** – Ideological space : Dominance vs Abstraction

The nouns that alternate in our corpus all refer to very powerful government positions (*ministre*, *garde des sceaux*, *président(e)* etc.). Therefore, it seems reasonable to assume that, in virtue of occupying one of these positions, individuals in the denotation of a word like *ministre* (written  $\llbracket\text{ministre}\rrbracket$ ) acquire a high level of institutional dominance. For convenience, we will assume that the level of institutional dominance of ministers is greater than or equal to 0.7, as shown in (18).

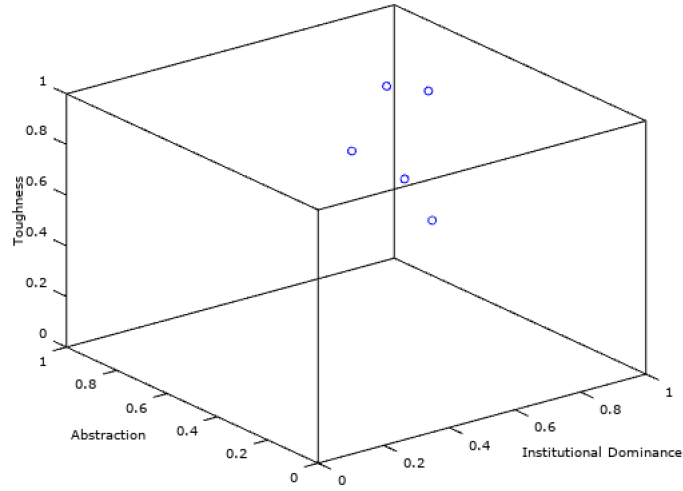
- (18)  $\llbracket\text{ministre}\rrbracket$  is a subset of the set of individuals that lie in region defined by the personae whose institutional dominance exceeds 0.7.

Given the 1986 model (Figure 3) and the meaning of *ministre* (18), the ideological space occupied by ministers is defined by the personae in Figure 6.

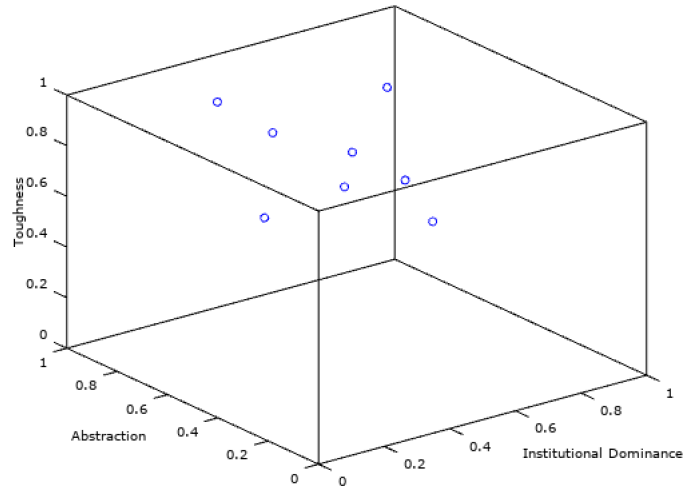
We propose that grammatical gender marking (M/F) also picks out regions: the space associated with all the personae that have a high level of **at least one** of the properties in the indexical field (Burnett, 2017). So the social meaning of masculine g-gender is the space associated with all the personae that are above the third quartile on the institutional dominance, abstraction or toughness scales, as shown in Figure 7. In other words, masculine g-gender picks out the top half of the cube.

Following the analysis in (16), the social meaning of feminine g-gender corresponds to the space associated with all the personae that are lower than the first quartile on the dimensions in the indexical field, as shown in Figure 8. In other words, feminine g-gender picks out the lower half of the cube.

All the personae that can be picked out with the noun *ministre* (Figure 6) are also in the



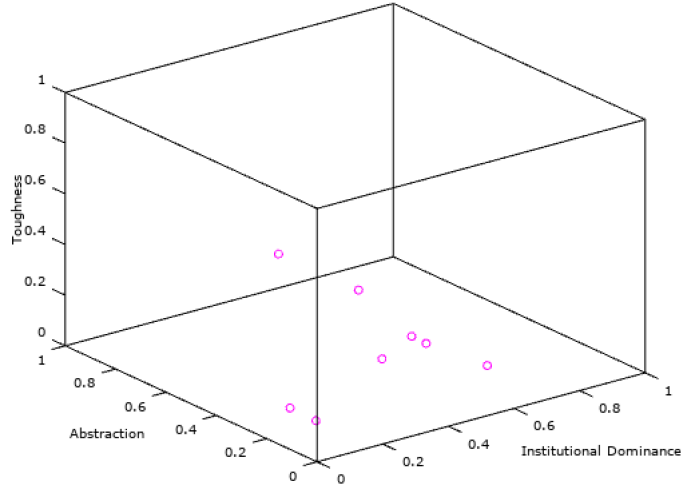
**Figure 6** – Ideological space : *[[ministre]]* in 1986



**Figure 7** – Space denoted by the social meaning of masculine g-gender

indexical field of masculine g-gender (Figure 7). Therefore, *le ministre* can be felicitously used to describe any minister in the model. The space picked out by the indexical field of the feminine, on the other hand, is disjoint from *[[ministre]]*. So, in this model, the expression *la ministre* does not pick out any coherent chunk of ideological space, and it cannot be used to describe any minister in 1986.<sup>38</sup> Based on this result, we can see why Fabius' policy was at a serious disadvantage in 1986: the prescription to use the feminine form to refer to

<sup>38</sup>Of course some politicians, like Yvette Roudy, already have the more modern ideological structure of the late 90s at this time. For those speakers, we predict that feminine can be used, and indeed Roudy is one of the very few users of the feminine in the 1980s in our corpus.



**Figure 8** – Space denoted by the social meaning of feminine g-gender

ministers and other individuals occupying powerful positions in governmental institutions **contradicted** the dominant ideological structure in the minds of speakers at the time.

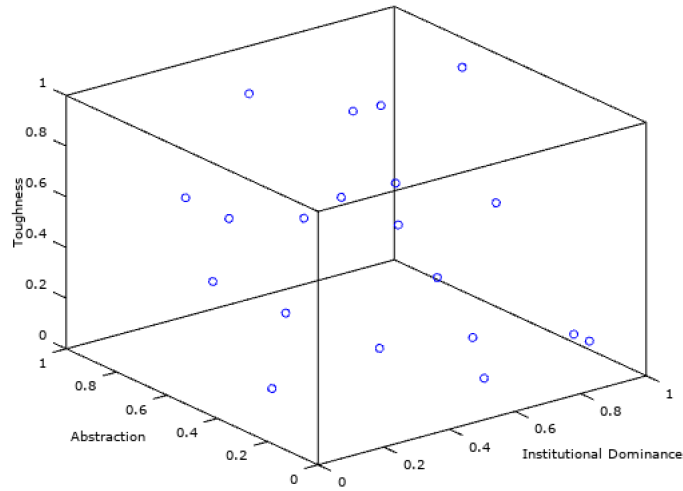
In contrast, in 1998, we argued that speakers' ideological structures are very different: the lower righthand corner of the ideological space contains personae who are both sensitive and pragmatic, but also highly dominant. These are the *feminine political personae* described in section 3, who are instantiated by individuals like Bachelot and Royal. A model of such an ideological space is shown in Figure 9: although the relationship between other dimensions has not changed (i.e. there is still a correlation between abstraction and toughness), there has been a weakening of the relationship between institutional dominance and the other dimensions.

Keeping the same definitions as in the 1986 model, we see that these new personae change the denotation of *ministre* and the indexical fields of both masculine and feminine gender marking. Firstly,  $\llbracket \text{ministre} \rrbracket$  now has more personae in its denotation (Figure 10).

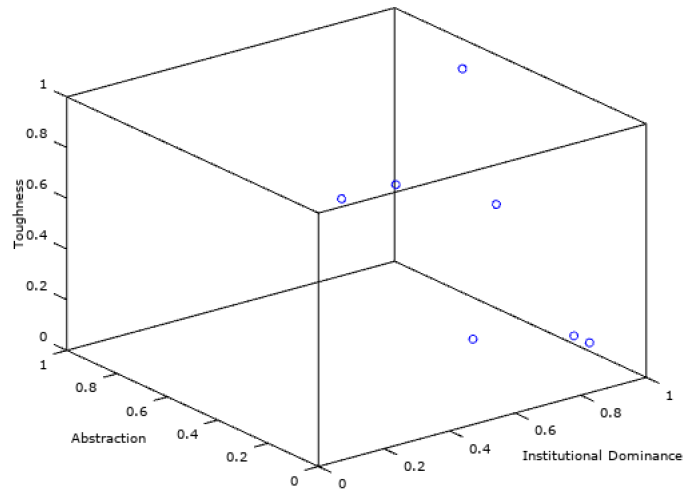
Secondly, these new ministers are in **both** the indexical field of the masculine, because they are highly institutionally dominant (Figure 11) **and** the indexical field of the feminine, because they are very sensitive or pragmatic (Figure 12).

Thus, we predict that speakers can use both *le ministre* and *la ministre* to construct the feminine political personae. Furthermore, since *la ministre* is the only one that can be used to construct the very feminine personae, the grammatically feminine expression is more specific and therefore more **informative**. So from basic principles of Gricean reasoning (Grice, 1975), we would expect speakers to favour the feminine when they construct the feminine political persona.<sup>39</sup>

<sup>39</sup>A formal model of g-gender selection within informativity-based game theoretic pragmatics is given in



**Figure 9** – Dominant politician ideological structure in the late 1990s

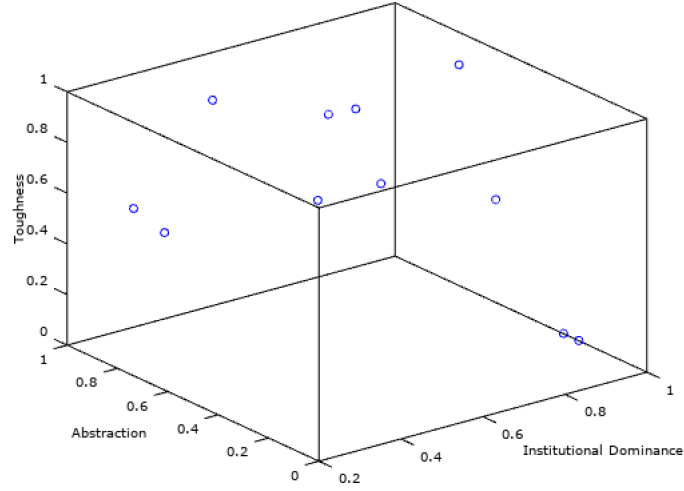


**Figure 10** – Ideological space : *[[ministre]]* in 1998

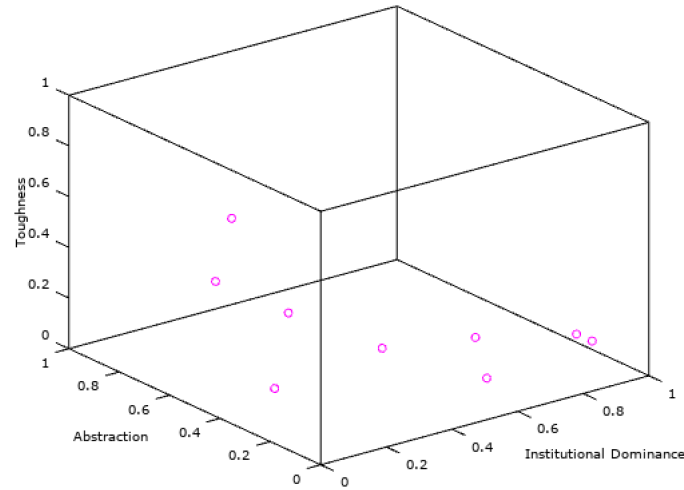
On the other hand, the universalist political personae are not sensitive or pragmatic, so they are not included in the indexical field of feminine g-gender. Therefore, we predict that speakers like Alliot-Marie and Aubry, who are interested in constructing the less feminine persona, should favour *le ministre*. However, since they also have the feminine political personae in their ideological space, *la ministre* is not contradictory as it was in 1986. Therefore, when Jospin restates Fabius' policy in 1998, although they may feel that they are forced to communicate a slightly different meaning than they originally wished, it is still felicitous for them to use *la ministre* to describe themselves and their female colleagues.

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Burnett and Bonami (2017).



**Figure 11** – Indexical field for masculine in 1998



**Figure 12** – Indexical field for feminine in 1998

## 5 Conclusion

In this paper, we presented a new study of variation and change in French grammatical gender in the *Assemblée Nationale*. We argued that the actuation of the change from masculine grammatical gender to feminine grammatical gender in references to women was linked to broader social changes associated with gender ideologies in France in the late 1990s, namely, the development of the feminine political persona. We proposed that the social conditioning that we observed based on political party is the result of a combination of the indexical meaning of grammatical gender and the rate at which speakers across

the political spectrum modify their ideologies to include this persona. Our paper therefore presents new quantitative evidence concerning the sociolinguistic consequences of the *parité* political movement and, more generally, our article contributes to the study of language and gender in late 20th century France.

We also presented a formal model of the relationship between ideological structure and linguistic meaning which combines Gärdenfors (2000, 2014)’s *Conceptual Spaces* framework with Eckert (2008)’s indexical fields. We showed how we can use these models to explicitly characterize both the ideological change in late 1990s and the consequences that this change had on the use of *le ministre* vs *la ministre*. We therefore conclude that lexical semantic frameworks, such as Conceptual Spaces, are promising for capturing the link between ideologies and linguistic production, and that tools from formal semantics and pragmatics have a role to play in the study of sociolinguistic phenomena.

Finally, this paper also makes a contribution to what (Weinreich et al., 1968, 102) call the “actuation problem” for historical linguistics, and, more specifically, to our understanding of the role that linguistic prescription and language policies can play in the actuation of linguistic changes. Previous work on language planning has stressed the importance of having members of the community at the top of the social order support the proposed change (Ehrlich and King, 1992; Pauwels, 1998, 1999, among others); however, our study shows that this condition, although possibly necessary, is not sufficient: Fabius and Jospin had the same prestigious governmental position and similar levels of political power; however, Jospin’s linguistic prescription succeeded where Fabius’ failed. We argued that differences in the social context between 1986 and 1998 created a qualitative difference between what Fabius proposed speakers do and what Jospin proposed: Jospin ordered speakers to switch from one well-formed linguistic option in their language to another; whereas, Fabius ordered speakers to both switch which form they use and accommodate new conceptual structure. Our study therefore suggests that language policies will only be successful if they are consistent with ideologies in the speech community; thus, non-linguistic discursive work also has a role to play in building the ideological structure that is a precondition for substantive for policy-induced language change.

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