

Inclusive language in medical texts and medical translation in French

Aurélié Gobet

Révolution Inclusive
Nantes, France

doi: 10.56012/jkki4441

Correspondence to:

Aurélié Gobet

gobetaurelie@gmail.com

Abstract

In French, the grammatical rule of the generic masculine, known as *neutral*, reveals a patriarchal worldview. This article looks at the consequences of this way of writing in medical texts and in medical translation. It also gives suggestions on how to write medical texts and translate in French in a more inclusive way.

Words matter, especially if you are a writer or a translator, or both.

You will find this article interesting if you speak some French, and even more interesting if you don't, because you will expand your horizons and learn something new.

The 1789 French "Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen" is a fundamental text of the French Revolution. It defines a series of individual and universal rights, as well as the conditions for their implementation. But how can those rights be universal, when "homme" means "man" and "citoyen" means "male citizen"?

With that in mind, Olympe de Gouges drafted the "Déclaration des droits de la femme et de la citoyenne" (Declaration of the rights of woman and of the [female] citizen)^{1,2} in 1791. If this sounds odd, ask yourself why terms like "homme" or "citoyen" are supposed to represent all people.

My journey towards inclusive French

My name is Aurélié Gobet and I have been a medical translator for 13 years. I translate from German and English into French. I specialise in medical and pharmaceutical content, mostly translating clinical trial documents, drug leaflets,

and medical marketing documents. I am an experienced translator and a feminist, and I have come to realise that I was conveying sexist bias when I wrote using the so-called *generic masculine* in French.

I also co-founded *Révolution Inclusive* with 11 other experienced translators. We offer training, rewriting and translation services in inclusive French. To date, we have run training sessions and workshops for translation students and a diverse group of people at translation and sustainable development events.

This article will explain my thinking on inclusive French and some of the specific challenges of inclusive language in medical texts in French.

Inclusive language: definition and purpose

Let us start with a definition of inclusive language: "The aim of employing inclusive language is to avoid the use of words, terms, expressions or grammatical structures that may, inadvertently or otherwise, be interpreted as in some way excluding individuals or groups of people."³

Inclusive language is a major tool to question what we have considered the norm until now (i.e. the cisgender, heterosexual, able-bodied, white male). It can no longer be the universal representation of humanity, which is much more diverse than that.

Language is also a way to represent people who are experiencing discrimination based on gender, age, race, health, and many other factors. Using inclusive language is a must to point out discrimination.

Inclusive language applies to everyone, especially people experiencing discrimination.

French grammar is sexist

In French grammar, the only agreement rule that is taught in school is "le masculin l'emporte sur le féminin" (the masculine form prevails over the feminine form).

It means that when you say "I can see a tree and 100 women. They are very far away," "they" will be translated as "ils", which is the masculine plural pronoun that is supposed to be *neutral* in French.

However, studies show that our brains first imagine a group of men when we read or hear the

pronoun "ils" in French, even though it is supposed to be neutral.⁴ For example, if you say "un groupe de musiciens" (a group of musicians), people will imagine men.⁵

Inclusive language is important because we need to give more visibility in the French language to women and all people who are not cisgender men.

Challenges of binary gender distribution in medical French

Pregnancy and period in medical translations

Someone being pregnant or having a period might not identify as a woman. Someone having testicular cancer might not identify as a man. Gender is a very wide spectrum and is not binary. Sometimes it is related to what the genitalia look like, but sometimes it is not. Self-determination is key in the definition of gender.

So, be careful before you use the words "women" or "female participants" in the contraception part of a clinical trial document designed for participants. Not all women have ovaries (for example, trans women and women who had their ovaries resected don't) and not all people having ovaries are women (for example trans men). The same applies to menstruation.

A better way to handle it is simply to describe what you need to describe. It is very much down to earth. What do you really need to talk about? People? A specific part of their bodies (ovaries, uterus, testicles, breasts, etc.), a specific physiological process (period, menopause, etc.)?

Translation of "patients"

After I had training in inclusive French in 2021, I realised that translating the English word "patients" with the French word "patients" was incorrect.

As mentioned above, studies show that our brains first think of a group of men when we use words only in their plural masculine form in French (despite the fact that it is supposed to describe a mixed group of people).

We need to stop writing medical documents in the generic masculine in French. The less patients feel concerned by the terms we use, the less likely they are to feel concerned by clinical studies and treatments.



Male-centred clinical research

Clinical research has been male-centred for too long.

Can you imagine prescribing a drug for women that was mainly studied in men? It would be like considering that children are just tiny adults and that you can find the right treatment and dosage on a *pro rata* calculation.

Every person has a different physiology, and it is now obvious that your weight, height, and hormone levels have an influence on the way drugs work. Today, drug dosage is adapted to people who are younger, older, pregnant or who have renal or hepatic insufficiency. But why is it still male-centred?

Advice and resources

To write more inclusive medical content, you need to talk to the people directly concerned. I am one of those people, so for me it is really a matter of how I think of myself and how I talk about myself with other people.

Conclusion

Words matter. Words reflect our worldview. It is a fact that can no longer be ignored by writers and translators of highly gendered languages such as French. Not using the right terminology when referring to people means denying their existence in language and in our conception of the world.

There are many ways of using a more inclusive language. It all starts with coming to terms with a worldview that we may not be used to, as we come from a binary, patriarchal society. Change is happening right now in people's minds and in languages. Arbitrary grammar rules imposed by the ruling class will not prevent this change. It is the responsibility of writers, editors and translators to learn how to embrace this evolution and provide professional writing that truly reflects the world as it is.

Acknowledgements

The author would like to thank Charlotte Marti for her contribution which greatly improved the article.

Disclaimers

The author co-founded and is currently working for *Révolution Inclusive*, which offers fee-based services on inclusive French, such as training, content rewriting, and workshops.

Disclosures and conflicts of interest

The author declares no conflicts of interest.

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Resources on inclusive language

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Nations Unies. Orientations pour un langage inclusif en français. Available from: <https://www.un.org/fr/gender-inclusive-language/guidelines.shtml> (French version).

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Author information

Aurélie Gobet has 13 years' experience in medical translation. They translate documents related to clinical trials, pharmacology and medical marketing from English and German into French.

Their commitment against sexism led them to co-create *Révolution Inclusive* in 2022 to fight discrimination in language and communication.