The French Language in Québec: 400 Years of History and Life
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The Feminization of Titles in Québec

It was during the 1970s that the question of the feminization of titles in Québec (omitted) really arose: women were acceding to functions that previously had been reserved for men, functions whose names had no feminine equivalent. On the other side of the Atlantic, French women promoted to prestigious posts take pride in using masculine titles and do so even when in common usage these are declined in the feminine (as for instance, Jeanne Dubois, avocat à la Cour (barrister), Madame l’ambassadeur (Madam Ambassador)).

Following the example of the Americans who opt for neutralizing names to avoid any discrimination, Canadian and Québec government bodies have also been tempted to even out gender. The adoption of neutral terms that would be as suitable for male as for female incumbents appears an interesting and economical solution. The English language adapts very well to this standardization since names do not change for gender (for example, Mary is vice-president) and because the rare exceptions can be normalized (for example, chairperson to replace chairman).

This neutralization, however, quickly proved to be inapplicable in French. It seemed difficult, indeed, to replace by a masculine a feminine form that was already commonly used because this form was not perceived to be neutral but rather as masculine. By way of example, we might cite the Ministry of Labour of the federal government, which recommends trying out gardien d’enfant for gardienne d’enfant (day-care worker), ouvrier couturier (dressmaker) for couturière (the name couturier is deemed too meliorative), to replace corsetière by corsetier (corset-maker), dame de compagnie by compagnon (lady’s companion). This attempt to take gender out of names fails because of the ambiguity it creates and the refusal of those involved to give up a feminine term in common use that is perfectly adequate. What is more, unlike their European colleagues, Québécoises newly promoted to high positions do not want to assume masculine titles; they call for feminine ones.
The first official steps in the feminization of titles in Québec coincide with the victory of the Parti Québécois in 1976. It was then that the Québec National Assembly requested an opinion from the Office de la langue française: “In the event that a woman is named to the presidency or vice-presidency of the National Assembly, should she be given the title of Madame le Président or le Vice-président or Madame la Présidente or la Vice-présidente?” The OLF proceeded to make inquiries with the protocol services of the French Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the Élysée. The Office also examined the opinions of linguists on the question. The conclusions of this consultation were contradictory: French protocol requires constant recourse to the masculine, irrespective of the gender of the incumbent, but the most eminent linguists and grammarians in the French-speaking world have long endorsed the feminization of titles.

The Office de la langue française considers that, rather than linguistic motives, it is basically history that explains why prestigious titles have not been feminized in the twentieth century. The use of the masculine designation for posts whose holders are women seems transitory and dependent on legal, political or social circumstance. But it is in every way agrammatical and, precisely because of this, seems destined to be changed and to return to the norm. Consequently, the OLF came down on the side of the linguists and grammarians and recommended that the titles be feminized: it would be Madame la Présidente or Madame la Vice-présidente.

When the women among the newly elected Parti-Québécois members of the National Assembly also called for feminine titles, the OLF again decided in their favour, judging that la ministre and la députée were perfectly admissible as titles. Right away, feminine designations were taken up in the National Assembly, as they were in the electronic and print media. Finally, with the aim of promoting the feminization of titles, the Terminology Commission at the Office de la langue française issued a recommendation in the Official Gazette of Québec on July 28, 1979 that would be widely followed:

“As for the gender of job titles, the Office de la langue française has recommended the use of feminine forms in all possible cases:
- either adopting the feminine term in common use: couturière (seamstress), infirmière (nurse), avocate;

- or adopting the noun of common gender preceded by a feminine determinative. Examples: une journaliste, une architecte, une ministre;

- or by spontaneously creating a feminine form that respects French morphology. Examples: députée, chirurgienne (surgeon), praticienne (medical practitioner);

- or by attaching the word femme. Examples: femme-magistrat (magistrate), femme-chef d’entreprise (company director), femme-ingénieur (engineer). 12"

In the brief history of the feminization of titles in Québec the new female members and ministers in the first government of the Parti Québécois opened the way that trade unions would follow by applying the feminization of names in collective agreements. And then, gradually as they gained access to new functions, to professions not long since exclusively male, a large majority of Québec women decided in favour of feminine titles that respected the logic of the language and showed that Québec society was ahead of its time. It is interesting to point out that the Belgians and the Swiss are increasingly following in the footsteps of the Québécois and that two decades later in France eight newly elected women deputies in the Jospin government have called for and have been granted the right to bear a feminine title.

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