

PERCOLATION OF GENDER IN FRENCH: THE CASE OF *ENCEINTE*

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Abstract: In resources as varied as an introductory textbook on French phonology and morphology, dictionaries, language planning articles, and computational linguistics talks, it is frequently mentioned that the word *enceinte* ('pregnant') is rare among adjectives for having gender specified in the lexicon. I argue that this specification is unnecessary. First, there is no morphological evidence showing how *enceinte* behaves differently from any other invariable adjective in French. For many speakers, the incongruity of a sentence like *Le capitaine Prieur est enceinte* ('Captain Prieur is pregnant') would therefore be principally a semantic or sociolinguistic issue. Conversely, many speakers do object to the above sentence, saying that the use of the feminine is improper, which would suggest that the adjective has no underlying gender for these speakers. By ruling out the notion that *enceinte* is an exceptional adjective, we can avoid unnecessary complications of the French gender system.

1. Introduction

Many treatments of gender in Romance languages (including Harris, 1991; Aronoff, 1994; and others) have treated gender as a property intrinsic to nouns, that is, that nouns alone bear a morphological feature for gender in the lexicon, e.g., [+feminine]. Adjectives, on the other hand, have no gender specified in the lexicon, and instead receive it from the noun phrase they modify. This process of being assigned gender is part of a process called "percolation," through which features of a head spread to other constituents of the phrase or word (Lieber, 1992). In their introduction to French phonology and morphology, Brousseau & Nikiéma (2001) adopt this theoretical claim, one that I too find amply supported by the available evidence. They mention however, that there are some rare, exceptional adjectives such as *enceinte* ('pregnant') that defy this convention and are indeed specified for gender underlyingly (p. 296), and leave all other discussion of such adjectives aside. They are by no means the only ones who assert this exception without any further analysis. Veronis (1988) echoes this belief in a discussion of the importance of specifying morphosyntactic features for computers to recognize linguistic errors. Fleischman (1997, p. 834), in an article about nonsexist language, describes *enceinte* as "an adjective which, notwithstanding advances in biotechnology, can still occur only in the feminine." Dictionaries, including *Le Larousse de poche* (2007), *Le Nouveau Petit Robert* (Rey-Debove & Rey, 2005) and *Trésor de la langue française* (2008), also describe *enceinte* as a feminine adjective. The latter also asserts that *saure* 'red' (used only with *hareng* 'herring') is only masculine and that *endocrine* 'endocrine' is only feminine. So while *enceinte* is the typical example, it is by no means the only possible adjective that can be claimed to have gender underlyingly.

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It is, however, a mistake to say that any French adjectives bear morphological gender in the lexicon. It is true that morphologists, sociolinguists, and lexicographers all approach similar linguistic data from different angles, and that the implications of their analyses are consequently going to be different. That is, we should not expect lexicographers to worry about the impact that their analysis will have on morphologists, though some consideration of analyses made by other linguists is almost always helpful. But when they all make this assertion about *enceinte*, they reinforce each other and add unnecessary complexity to each of their domains without any explanation or defense. In reality, there is no need to specify *enceinte* (or any other adjective) as being specified for gender. First of all, there is no morphological evidence showing how for most speakers, *enceinte* demonstrates different behavior or structure from invariable adjectives in French. Secondly, there are some speakers who do accept the masculine form of the adjective, suggesting that *enceinte* is in fact a variable adjective for them.

In this squib, I first discuss the relevant morphological and phonological principles at work in French. Next, I examine the patterning of *enceinte* according to these principles. Lastly, I discuss the social and semantic factors that play a role in the misconception that *enceinte* is lexically specified for any morphological gender.

2. Phonology and morphology of French

To understand the alternations between masculine and feminine adjectives in French, one must first understand one basic property of French phonology: the integration of floating segments. A floating segment is defined as any segment whose phonetic realization depends on the presence of certain morphological or phonological conditions. The word *roux* ‘red-headed’ would have the phonological structure in (1).

(1) x x timing slots
 | |
 ʁ u s segments

A timing slot for each of the first two segments is lexically specified (Prunet, 1992), and an additional one is generated when a vowel-initial syllable follows the floating segment, that is, when there is a need to satisfy the No Empty Onset Principle (Paradis & El Fenne, 1995). As a result, when the infinitival suffix *-ir* is attached to the adjective, what arises is not **rouir*, but *roussir*, as shown in (2).

(2) x x x x x timing slots
 | | | | |
 ʁ u s i ʁ segments

There are two inflectional morphemes for adjectival gender: the null morpheme for the masculine, and the schwa for the feminine (represented by orthographic *-e*).¹ When the

¹ The actual morpheme for the feminine is disputed, with some saying the schwa is a degenerate syllable (e.g., Anderson, 1982; Prunet, 1992; Brousseau & Nikiéma, 2001), while others say it is a full vowel that may or

the adjectival stem; for the masculine, they either have a similar full vowel suffix (written *-o*) or have a null morpheme. None have floating segments in the lexicon in the same way that French does. I suggest that the ambiguity between a fixed consonant and a floating segment in a word that is almost always used in the feminine is the reason why French *appears* to use the feminine while all other Romance languages use the masculine. In reality, however, *enceinte* is just an invariable adjective for most speakers.

Language	Adjective searched with “Thomas Beatie”	# Raw hits
French	“enceint” (masc.)	10,400
	“enceinte” (fem.)	20,400
Spanish	“embarazado” (masc.)	80,200
	“embarazada” (fem.)	28,500
Italian	“incinto” (masc.)	35,300
	“incinta” (fem.)	13,400
Portuguese	“grávido” (masc.)	27,400
	“grávida” (fem.)	703
Catalan	“embarassat” (masc.)	692
	“embarassada” (fem.)	40
Romanian	“gravid” (masc.)	2,240
	“gravida” (fem.)	132
	“insarcinat” (masc.)	2,430
	“insarcinata” (fem.)	379

Table 1. Masculine & feminine forms of ‘pregnant’

However, there is some motivation to analyze *enceinte* as a variable adjective. First of all, *enceinte* is historically the inflected form of the past participle of the verb *enceindre* ‘to close off.’ The uninflected, basic form of the past participle would thus be *enceint*. Moreover, a Google search of the word “*enceint*” (necessarily in quotation marks, as Google will otherwise automatically include inflected forms in its searches) shows that many speakers do use the word *enceint* as an adjective meaning pregnant in some instances. For instance, Thomas Beatie is called *un homme enceint* about one-third of the time. There are also several sites talking about *un couple enceint* ‘a pregnant couple.’⁴ While Google searches are not substitutes for systematic scientific inquiry, they do provide a broad sample of native-speaker judgments. Fortunately in this case, they are backed up by historical corpus research shown in the *Trésor de la langue française* (2008), which shows that *enceint* is an attested form, used by such authors as the Goncourt brothers, namesakes of France’s highest literary prize, who said “*Et elle « fait » un certain Lord Howard, toqué, dont la manie est de se croire enceint*” ‘And it “makes” a certain Lord Howard, whose delusion is to believe himself to be pregnant.masc, crazy.’ It was also used by Claude Lévi-Strauss, the famous anthropologist, in 1958, when he said “*Ainsi ensorcelé, le garçon découvre qu’il est enceint*” ‘Thus bewitched, the boy discovers that he is pregnant.masc.’ Another adjective that the *Trésor* claims is feminine is *endocrine*, though for this adjective as well, there are masculine forms attested. Thus, rare though they might be, *enceint* and *endocrin* are available forms for the

⁴ “*Un couple enceinte*” still receives far more raw hits, however.

minority of speakers. Again, this is due to the ambiguity between a fixed consonant and a floating segment in a word that is almost always used in the feminine.

The last analysis of *enceinte* is that of Brousseau & Nikiéma (2001), Veronis (1988), and others: that of an invariable adjective specified for gender. Thus far, the two analyses (*enceinte* is invariable, *enceinte* is variable) have seemed to show no morphological or phonological impetus for such an analysis. There are, however, some sentences that could conceivably provide said impetus. For example, Fleischman (1997) describes the instance where the French prime minister's office announced in 1988 that the naval captain Dominique Prieur, who had been exiled several years earlier to French Polynesia, was going to return to France to give birth. In the announcement, the spokesperson used the sentence, "*Le capitaine Prieur est enceinte*" 'Captain.masc Prieur is pregnant.fem,' which gave pause to the grammatical sensibilities of some French speakers. For those who, during "*l'affaire Prieur*," did not accept the grammaticality of the above sentence, such a statement would only make sense if the feminine article *la* were used with the noun *capitaine*, traditionally a masculine noun, rendering *La capitaine Prieur est enceinte* 'Captain.fem Prieur is pregnant.' Note that the other possibility to restore grammatical symmetry, namely *Le capitaine Prieur est enceint*, is completely absent from the linguistic literature. This would seem to be evidence that *enceinte* indeed has an underlying gender specified. Based on the data alone, this could be taken as evidence that percolation with adjectives specified for gender would go in the opposite direction from every other combination in French, percolating from the complement to the head. Clearly this would be an exceptional process that is quite different from other instances of percolation, but since theories need to accommodate data, not the other way around, the theory might need to be adapted to account for the fact that a noun changes its gender in combination with a gender-specified adjective. Such an environment would provide the crucial morphological evidence to set *enceinte* apart from other adjectives, but in the next section, I discuss other, more plausible reasons for the gender switch.

4. Sociosemantic adjustments

Rather than suggesting that *enceinte* is morphologically distinct from other adjectives, I find it far more likely that the incongruity of the above sentence is derived from principally semantic grounds, and that the way it is resolved is not a morphological adjustment at the level of syntax, but rather a sociolinguistic one, namely an example of feminization of job titles. Dealing first with the issue of semantics, it is clear that the adjective *enceinte* encodes something distinctly female at its core. What is less clear, and the subject of far more debate, is whether *capitaine* encodes something male, masculine, or genderless. The French Academy, among others, contends that grammatical gender is arbitrary in the case of occupation names, and that in French, the masculine gender is the one that happens to include most occupations due to its status as the unmarked case (Fleischman, 1997, p. 838). Conversely, there are other studies that suggest that the use of the masculine article has some influence on the perceived gender of its referent, i.e., a masculine article before an occupation will connote a man doing the job, rather than some androgynous notion of a person doing it (see Cacciari & Padovani, 2007, and references therein).

The position of the Academy seems specious at best. In essence, it is akin to claiming that the majority of professions by sheer grammatical coincidence happened to be the same as the gender of the people holding those jobs, and that the fact that they were also the same

gender that controlled grammatical norms was also a coincidence. It is far more likely that the gender was derived from the biological sex of the men who held such posts. The Academy's position is also difficult to reconcile with the existence of forms such as *ambassadrice*, a word that proponents of *féminisation* wanted to use in reference to a woman who was an ambassador, but that others claimed was already reserved for the wife of an ambassador. If the word *ambassadeur* were truly sex-neutral, *ambassadrice* would mean 'spouse of an ambassador' rather than 'wife.' This is even further evidence that gender in the case of professions is principally derived from biological sex, not from morphological gender. The repair of *Le capitaine est enceinte* is a reaction to semantic incongruity. Indeed, Conrick (2002, p. 216) puts the sentence on the same level as *Un pompier a accouché la semaine dernière* ('A firefighter.masc gave birth last week'), a sentence that contains no morphological incongruity whatsoever, but semantically implies that a man gave birth. Thus, we can conclude that *La capitaine est enceinte* is not a case of gender percolation reversing its direction with a given morpheme (i.e., a repair independent of real-world knowledge), but rather a case of semantic opacity (a noun that designates a man linked with an adjective referring to a pregnant person) that ultimately led to the creation of an epicene noun.

Such opacities were a driving force behind the push in Francophone regions to create morphologically feminine counterparts (or epicene forms) to masculine professions, of which *la capitaine* was but one. This movement led to the acceptance of forms such as *la ministre*, previously exclusively a masculine noun. The repair of *le capitaine* to *la capitaine* was not only to resolve questionable grammaticality in the sentence with *enceinte*, but also to give strength to a larger movement to improve the status of women in the French public sphere. The use of *enceint*, on the other hand, does little to further any cause (the constituency of pregnant men being quite small). At best, it would sound odd to most people and would not solve the larger problem at hand. The decision to leave *enceinte* in the feminine form should not be construed as evidence that it is underlyingly specified for gender, but rather that there are more sociolinguistically salient forms in semantically opaque sentences that are more likely to be changed for reasons external to the grammar.

5. Conclusion

There is no reason to claim, as Brousseau & Nikiéma (2001) and many others do, that *enceinte* is specified for morphological gender. Most native speakers of French appear to analyze it as an invariable adjective, though there are also some who consider it to be variable. This variation is most likely the product of the ambiguity between a fixed consonant and a latent consonant in an adjective rarely used in the masculine form. Any unusual behavior of nouns around *enceinte* seems to be due primarily to semantic and sociolinguistic features of the words involved, and has little to do with morphosyntax. There is therefore no motivation to complicate the workings of French grammar for this one word. As linguists, we may be tempted from time to time to assert claims about the languages we work on without really investigating whether they are true, simply because we are reasonably convinced that they are, especially when that language is our native tongue. However, this paper should serve as a reminder to be especially careful with such hunches when they are likely to needlessly complicate our theories.

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