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## Language and culture wars: the far right's struggle against gender-neutral language

The far right has launched its own particular crusade against gender-neutral language (GNL). In this article, I examine how the parties Rassemblement National, in France, and Vox, in Spain, instrumentalise discursively their opposition to GNL as part of their overall political strategy of confronting social change. By using a culture war framework, I critically analyse the connections between the polarised representations of language and those of other fronts of cultural conflict that the far right directs against adversary groups. I show that both political parties have co-opted language into the culture wars they pursue on other fronts, albeit with significant differences. I argue that in addition to the idea of a single overall struggle based on moral differences and cultural cleavages, culture wars are also to be understood as interconnected fronts in different spheres of contention that the far right strategically exploits.

Far right; gender-neutral language; culture war; language policy; France; Spain

### 1. Introduction

The far right in Spain and France has launched its own particular crusade against gender-neutral language (GNL). This reaction comes after the increasing public support and social recognition that GNL has gained over recent years and, especially, after the adoption of GNL at some levels of administration in these countries. GNL is a set of communicative practices designed to promote more inclusive linguistic practices and to avoid gender bias. Alternative linguistic conventions of this type have a considerable impact in languages with grammatical gender, such as Spanish and French. This is because the masculine form in the standardised language functions generically.<sup>1</sup> GNL activism aims to contribute to effective social change

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<sup>1</sup> In both Spanish and French, the masculine forms of nouns referring to humans (e.g. *ciudadano*, *citoyen* 'citizen-MASC') and other elements that agree with these, such as adjectives and articles, are traditionally the unmarked form and thus function generically. Feminine forms, on the other hand, refer only to women (*ciudadana*, *citoyenne* 'female citizen-FEM'). There are various strategies to avoid the use of generic masculine such as, for instance, replacing generic masculine nouns by unmarked gender-indefinite ones (*ciudadanía*, *citoyenneté* 'citizenry') or inserting masculine-feminine pairs (*ciudadanos/as*, *citoyen-ne-s*), known as double gender marking. The latter strategy does not avoid the misgendering of non-binary people (Erdocia, 2021).

by reducing the asymmetrical treatment of genders through language and power inequalities (Pauwels 2003). Nevertheless, GNL is still a socially, ideologically and academically contested concept. Some of the arguments against GNL refer to issues of impracticality or involve appeals to authority, historical authenticity and freedom of speech (Parks and Robertson 1998), and the spectrum of speakers who do not follow or support particular forms of GNL goes well beyond the far right.

Research on the discourses on language used by right-wing and far-right populism has examined in particular the connection between national language, nationalism and identity. In her recent work, Wodak (2015, 2020) has noted the role of the far right in the revival of essentialist notions of language (e.g. mother tongue, language purity) that inform the procedures for citizenship and are used in many national language policy documents. However, other core conceptions of language from this perspective of “national languages” vs “other languages” (e.g. linguistic nativism, competence in the national language) do not apply in considerations of GNL. Since proposals for more inclusive forms of language stem from the ideological premises of feminist and progressive movements, discourses on GNL are situated along a different ideological axis. Hence, this article aims to contribute to the growing body of research on language and the far right by critically examining the particular courses of action that the political parties Rassemblement National (RN), in France, and Vox, in Spain, have undertaken against GNL.

To do so, I adopt a culture war framework. In his original conception of culture war, Hunter (1991) aimed to demonstrate the deep moral and ideological cleavage underlying society in the United States. Discourses on culture wars have proliferated in political talk and the term has gained considerable popularity in the media (Bain 2010). The notion has been revisited theoretically and applied to other contexts and new issues of contention (see Davis 2019). Although researchers on culture war have not focused on it, language is often an identity-based source of contention. In the specific case of GNL, it is rooted in the feminist movement and subsequently evolved to include a transgender perspective. Thus, GNL forms part of the demands of feminist and LGBTQ+ activism, some of which (e.g. gay and lesbian rights) have traditionally been considered as culture war issues. Drawing on the idea of fractal recursivity (Irvine and Gal 2000), I use a critical discourse approach (Wodak 2015, 2020; Krzyżanowski 2020) to analyse discourses and policy measures against GNL from a culture war perspective. More concretely, I aim to examine how Vox and RN instrumentalise discursively their opposition to GNL as part of their overall political strategy of halting the erosion of established patterns of political and cultural dominance (Betz and Johnson 2004). The specific question I ask in this article is: how does the far right use language in its strategy of culture wars?

Although both parties regard GNL as an issue of cultural struggle on its own, I show how they have co-opted language into the culture wars they pursue on other fronts, albeit with significant differences: whereas Vox’s strategy puts forward the idea of an overall culture war, RN deploys a strategy of discursive shifts and a redefinition and appropriation of issues and demands which are traditionally associated with feminism and the left. I argue that in addition to the idea of a single overall struggle based on moral differences and cultural

cleavages, culture wars are also to be understood as interconnected fronts in different spheres of contention that the far right opportunistically and strategically exploits. Thus, this study fruitfully contributes to the exploration of the links between culture wars and far-right populist politics.

## **2. Culture wars and the far right**

Hunter (1991, 42) argued that a new divide between “orthodoxy” and “progressivism” over the “meaning of America” has replaced the traditional divisions between denominations after a long process of secularisation and modernisation in the US. He coined the term “culture wars” to describe the “political and social hostility rooted in different systems of moral understanding”. That is, culture wars are critical disagreements over issues that are based on irreconcilable cultural and moral frameworks. He found that debates on abortion, gay rights, values in public education and multiculturalism, among other cultural issues, contained opposite impulses that defined two conservative/liberal polarities. Hunter’s account on culture wars came rapidly under scholarly scrutiny, with mixed outcomes: while some studies confirmed an increased societal polarisation, other studies did not find conclusive evidence of division or attributed it to other factors (see Davis 2019). However, even though the nature and extent of mass polarisation on cultural issues are not undisputed, scholars continue to explore potential applications of the notion of culture war in current debates on other topics, such as feminism, LGBTQ+ issues, Islam, globalisation and global warming (e.g. Castle 2019; Busbridge, Moffitt and Thorburn 2020). The presence of the term “culture wars” in scholarly literature, politics and media, therefore, seems to show both its persistence and its increasing popularity.

In my account, I use the term “culture war” to refer to a strategy that deliberately reinforces existing contention between groups where this is associated with morally and ideologically charged notions about how society should operate. Following an adversarial model based upon competition, contest and rivalry, groups deliberately create stark dichotomies in their struggle to impose values and moral codes. Such cultural conflict develops over opposing definitions and interpretations of social realities that are pitted against each other.

Here, it is necessary to make three observations about my use of the term “culture wars”. First, I adhere to the view that culture is a contested area embedded in politics (Sunny 2002) and not a matter of “commanding truths” or normative structures that are deeply embedded in consciousness and habits, as Hunter (1994, 200) suggests.

Secondly, I restrict the notion to the realm of partisan politics, which includes for example electoral tactics to mobilise voters and capitalise on social discontent by exploiting grievances. Although I presume that some strategies have the potential to provoke divisions and fracture society, my conception of culture wars is discursive and refers to the political sphere. Therefore, unlike Hunter, I do not claim that culture war is a concept that necessarily represents citizens’ ideological behaviour and belief systems in a fractured society.

Thirdly, the concept can refer to the struggle between traditional and emergent groups or dominant and resistant groups (Bain 2010). Yet, an assumption that underlies my study is the asymmetry of the warring groups that are involved in the culture wars: although a war requires two groups of combatants, I contend that it is normally reactionary social movements and their partisan allies in far-right circles that seek to draw new issues into culture wars and intentionally wage conflict (Minkenberg 2000). By so doing, I am also taking a side in the debate. This is probably unavoidable, as our interpretations of the political factors and moral values pervading any particular linguistic context almost automatically position us in one of the competing political blocs at work (Blommaert 1999). In my case, my positioning is not so much about an alignment with a particular partisan line but my personal misalignment with the antagonistic logic of the far right.

Ideological premises apart, the relationship that the far right has with culture wars comes from its very beginnings (Minkenberg 2000). Historically, the far right has relied on a strategy of formulating discourses that counter those of the left and social movements, a strategy that was about “establishing a cultural war, a *Kulturkampf* or *Gramscisme de droite*, with the goal of filling terms of public debate with a right-wing definition of a homogeneous nation” (2000, 180). The idea of cultural war follows the Gramscian notion of culture as a terrain of political struggle for moral and intellectual hegemony, in which the politics of language are included. In other words, cultural war is part of the discursive logic of far-right party politics in their attempts to articulate social meanings, (re)define representations of social realities and control social practices.

### **3. The far right and language: the different ideological axis of GNL**

To begin with, what is the far right? Theoretically, the narrowing down of such an ample political and ideological camp is not an easy exercise. Indeed, the literature includes a striking number of criteria, definitions and labels. Against the myriad of approaches, I join Minkenberg (2000, 175) in thinking that a focus on ideological criteria alone can provide a more precise and conceptually grounded definition for comparative purposes. He argues that ethnic nationalism, “the effort to construct an idea of nation and national belonging by radicalizing ethnic, religious, cultural and political criteria of exclusion”, is the far right’s *raison d’être*. One example of ethnic nationalism is the ethnopluralist doctrine, according to which radical right-wing parties claim the right of each country to protect its national identity from threats to its culture (Elgenius and Rydgren 2019). Within this exclusionary view, immigration is presented as one of the greatest threats to national cultures, including national languages. An assumption underlying my approach is that the far right is defined by both ethnic nationalism and populist ideologies (see Stavrakakis et al. 2017 for a thorough discussion); and Vox and RN fit the characteristics of members of the family of populist far-right parties (Ferreira 2019; Stockemer and Barisione 2017).

Language is frequently considered one of the pillars of a robust national identity, that is, an object of and a medium for uniqueness and distinctiveness. Yet, a linguistically foundationalist and essentialist perspective on language, one that is oriented towards

homogeneousness rather than cohesiveness, may contribute to “othering” or to the formation of “others” (Wodak 2015). This is the case for speakers who have a first language (or first languages) other than the national language, who do not often conform to the expectations of such a homogeneity. The inclusionary–exclusionary processes that are involved in constructions of identity around language rely on a strict interpretation of the idea of endogenous language as opposed to exogenous languages (see Erdocia 2020 for a discussion from a language rights perspective). The result is often the instrumentalisation of language as a tool for migration control (Rheindorf and Wodak 2020; see Bruzos, Erdocia and Khan 2018 for the Spanish case) and, worse, the intensification of exclusionary identity politics.

When focusing on a discussion of GNL, the relationship between language and far right needs to be extracted from an exclusive logic of national allegiance, since here the axis of language is constructed in line with ideological movements such as feminism or leftism. Instead, I draw on the idea of change. The far right promotes ethnic identities as permanent, culturally rooted in ancestry and having a monolithic set of symbolic features (Betz and Johnson 2004). They aim to impose national and social homogeneity and are reluctant to embrace subjective self-expression values (e.g. social differentiation and individualisation), which the cultural shift in Western countries in recent decades has brought about (Norris and Inglehart 2019). Furthermore, undoing social change is at the core of the far right’s thinking and acting (Minkenberg 2000). This idea of change – and the endeavour to counter it – is important for my account, as one of the goals of advocates of GNL is a broader societal transformation mediated by the use of alternative linguistic conventions. GNL is constituted by sets of beliefs and moral values that are linked to transformative ideologies at a wider social level (Erdocia 2021).

#### **4. The study**

In line with my culture war framework, I take a discursively oriented perspective to study the far right’s “dynamic mixing of content and form” (Wodak 2020, 32). Although I assume that the far right’s discourse integrates stylistic and ideological elements that are mutually reinforcing, my focus centres less on the populist rhetorical and stylistic repertoire (Brubaker 2017) than on the ideological content that the far right communicates in public discourses and that is embedded in their policy proposals. Following other critical discourse studies of the right-wing and populism (Wodak 2015; Krzyżanowski 2020), I engage in a two-step analysis: I begin by mapping out the thematic content of texts and then move on to an in-depth analysis that examines the discursive strategies, representations and argumentation in context.

The analysis in the second step draws inspiration from the sociolinguistic conceptualisation of fractal recursivity (Irvine and Gal 2000, 38), which has been amply used in studying the construction of ideological representations of social, cultural and linguistic differences. Fractal recursivity is “the projection of an opposition, salient at some level of relationship, onto some other level”. Reminiscent of geometric fractals, it refers to the repetition of and

relationship among self-similar structures across different scales. Through recursivity, the content of a dichotomy is repeatedly projected onto narrower contexts or broader ones, or onto different social-cultural “objects” (Gal 2002), thereby organising and (re)categorising contexts and objects.

This notion has heuristic potential for analysing language from a culture war perspective because fractal recursivity relates “binarisation”, or dichotomising processes, that are integral in one part of the ideology of the far right to other parts. With this framework, I aim to explore the connections between the far right’s polarised representations of language and those of other fronts of cultural conflict that the far right directs against adversary groups and institutions. My focal point is the oppositional “we” vs “they” structure, which is characteristic of ideologically polarised discourses (Van Dijk 1997). I analyse how this dualistic structure in discourses about GNL is projected and discursively tied to other fronts of contention and I investigate whether fronts are discursively organised in some sort of hierarchy, which I expect to be the case. Simply put, I examine how the far right represents the “we–they” opposition through the lenses of different cultural issues, including language.

My data are drawn from searches in the national websites of both RN and Vox, and in two additional regional websites of RN. On each website, I conducted a keyword search for terms associated with gender-neutral language and inclusive language in French or Spanish, such as “écriture-langage inclusive”, “langage épïcène”, “langage non sexiste”, “lenguaje inclusivo” and “lenguaje no sexista”. Here a terminological remark must be made. Gender-neutral language and inclusive language are two related but different concepts: whereas the former term focuses on the elimination of gender bias in discourse, the latter includes the elimination of many forms of discrimination, including gender, racial, ethnic and disability discrimination. However, this distinction is not always reflected in the way in which non-experts refer in mainstream debates to linguistic forms that are distinct from the standard language. In the texts under analysis, the French or Spanish equivalent of “inclusive language” is the most commonly used term, but is used to refer purely to linguistic practices that avoid gender discrimination, rather than any other form of discrimination. Given this exclusive focus on gender, I use the term GNL throughout this article.

My search resulted in nine items for RN and seven for Vox, which cover the period between 2017 and 2020. The items include texts such as political statements, press releases, parliamentary speeches and links to interviews. This was complemented by three policy documents<sup>2</sup> to which some of the items refer. All 19 items were analysed.

## **5. GNL in oppositional politics**

I present the analysis of the French and Spanish cases in two different sections. In each section, I begin by providing essential contextual factors and background, which represent

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<sup>2</sup> RN: draft law to prohibit the use of inclusive language, National Assembly; non-binding law to stop the use of GNL, Regional Council of Centre-Val de Loire. Vox: non-binding law to follow RAE’s recommendations, Parliament of Andalusia.

important reference points for the discourses about GNL. I then present the analysis of the far right's opposition to GNL in relation with their overall strategy of confronting social change. This part is organised thematically according to the first step of the analysis.

### **5.1. Struggle against GNL in France**

#### *The context*

The year 2017 marked an important moment for the public debate about GNL in France. Various representatives of the centre-right government, which came to power after the election of Emmanuel Macron to the French presidency, openly showed their opposition to GNL. For example, the education minister Jean-Michel Blanquer criticised the publication of a school textbook that follows the recommendations of the High Council for Gender Equality for non-stereotypical language. In the same vein, the prime minister Édouard Philippe asked the members of the government to not use GNL in the texts for the *Journal officiel de la République française*, which publishes legal information from the government. Also in 2017, the Académie Française (2017) released a short statement arguing that GNL erodes the unity, clarity and legibility of French. The academy explained its stance in blunt terms: “On this occasion, it is not about looking after the norm but about ensuring the future and raising the alarm: in the face of this ‘inclusive’ aberration, the French language is now in deadly danger.”<sup>3</sup> RN used this public positioning and the linguistic authority that emanates from the academy as part of their legitimisation argument for the adoption of restrictive measures against GNL.

Calls for the regulation of writing conventions in French governmental organisations have undergone a significant change since that time. In 2017, for example, RN presented a proposal that aimed to stop GNL being used in the official documents of the regional council of Centre-Val de Loire. The adoption of GNL by some councils after the local elections in 2020, notably in the Green-run council of Lyon, prompted a quick response. A group of far-right and right-wing members of the National Assembly (including the president of RN, Marine Le Pen, other members of this party and two former members of Emmanuel Macron's centrist party La République En Marche) submitted a draft law (n° 3273, 28 July 2020) to enforce the use of standard language:

(1) The publications and communications that are disseminated in France from a representative of a public body, a private person performing a public service or a private person who is the recipient of public subsidy must not be written in so-called inclusive writing, that is, writing and typographic conventions that intend to replace the use of masculine generics.

This proposal, which is under consideration as this article is being written, represents a qualitative leap forward from previous policy initiatives because its inclusion of private

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<sup>3</sup> The translations from French and Spanish are those of the author.

language practices (for individuals who are receiving public benefits) may have profound normative implications.

### *GNL vs physical safety and the “valuable” feminism*

In a press release entitled “Inclusive writing: ‘Feminising’ words does not serve women’s rights”, Julien Leonardelli, the departmental secretary of RN in Haute-Garonne, links GNL to immigration. He severely criticises a manifesto in which a group of over 300 teachers from primary school to university are opposed to teaching the standard use of masculine generics. The discourse then suddenly shifts into conflating immigration and sexism:

(2) I denounce this rearguard action by self-proclaimed feminists whose unrest is only a diversion that intends to orient the debate on all that is superfluous in the defence of women’s rights (...) The decline in women’s rights in our country is undoubtedly due to massive and uncontrolled immigration, which strengthens communitarianism through which Islamism thrives and takes root in our territories. In fact, the urgent matter is not the absurd feminisation of words, but the French Colognes and Molenbeeks (...) To allow French women to live free and secure everywhere, we must stop the crazy immigration policy in our country. (10 November 2017)

In this patronising and blatantly racist and xenophobic statement, RN presents alleged Muslim or immigrant perpetrators of violence against women in a collectivised manner (“French Colognes and Molenbeeks”). Regarding GNL, RN dismisses (“diversion”, “superfluous”) and even ridicules it (“absurd”). Moreover, RN professes a sort of pro-women stance (“defence of women’s rights”) according to which GNL represents a futile or ideological version of feminism. The representation of this *vacuous feminism* serves to draw a contrast with the far right’s interpretation of *valuable feminism*, a sort of ethnically ultranationalist approach to women’s rights that demonises Muslim immigration and blames it for women’s lack of security and curtailment of their rights (see Kallis 2018). Hence, feminism, detached from any connotation of pluralism and respect for diversity, is transformed into a floating signifier (cf. Laclau 1996) with which a part of the right-wing conservative electorate can more easily identify. This kind of approach often results in pseudo-emancipatory gender policies that are often contradictory (Wodak 2015).

Although the focus of discursive representation in the previous extract is principally directed towards “them”, the oppositional “them” vs “us” structure occurs across different scales. On the one hand, the representation of this opposition follows the proposition *A/not A* (Andrus 2012), in which *A* represents GNL. GNL constitutes “they” and *not GNL* (standard language) forms “we”. On the other hand, however, when *B* equals feminism, the opposition “they”/“we” is not merely represented as *B/not B*; put differently, there is no such correlation as “they”=feminist, “we”=not feminist. Instead, the far right seems to agree with their own form of *B* (feminism) but *B* is subject to the inclusion of *C* (Islamophobia) and the rejection of *A* (GNL).



Culture war discourses presuppose the use of standardised sets of simple binary constructs, such as standard language vs GNL or feminist vs non-feminist. As seen above, this conception of binary structures only works for representations of language (“they”=GNL; “we”=standard language) and not for representations of feminism. In this latter case, following the notion of fractal recursivity, the opposition “we”/“they” is projected from language onto a broader scale (feminism) and involves different cultural objects (immigration/Islamophobia). These cultural issues are organised into hierarchies of value or electoral strategy, stressing some (restrictive feminism and Islamophobia) at the expense of others (feminist language activism). Propagating the politics of fear towards Muslims and favouring an exclusionary form of feminism is to be expected from far right’s forces (Betz and Johnson 2004), as their strategies of presenting a perceived Islamic threat to women’s rights are aimed at attracting female voters (Miller-Idriss and Pilkington 2017). On the contrary, the far right’s struggle to control language does not seem to be driven by electoral calculation but by central ideological notions such as linguistic authenticity and authority (Gal and Woolard 2001).

#### *GNL vs economic and material security*

The same cultural issues interact in a press release of Wallerand de Saint-Just, a member of the Executive Committee of Front National (the name by which RN was known until 2018). However, in comparison with the previous example, the focus is now on a sort of exclusionary feminism that is sensitive to inequalities at work.

(3) As long as we only talk about the feminisation of words, we avoid confronting the intolerable reality of the decline in women’s fundamental freedoms, which are linked to the progression of communitarian demands and cultural practices foreign to the French tradition. The real feminist fight is the fight for equal pay, against the professional and social precariousness of which women are the main victims and which the labour act will worsen (...) The rest is just a smokescreen and a ploy. (27 October 2017)

Significantly, the document is entitled “Inclusive writing: Let’s not get the wrong fight”, so it is not surprising that RN trivialises GNL and ignores possible transformative changes that this language model can bring about. GNL is strategically sandwiched between the topics of immigration and women’s rights. In direct appropriation of part of the feminist struggle for equality (see Mondon and Winter 2020, 68–75), RN accommodates in its “welfare chauvinism” project (Mudde 2007) demands such as equal pay, measures against precariousness and criticism of the labour act. Minkenberg (2000, 180) argues that “this process of ‘issue framing’ aims at establishing a cultural war” by imbuing terms of public debate with a far-right definition of issues such as “homogeneous nation, a strong state and discrimination against all things ‘foreign’”. While the mention of “cultural practices foreign to the French tradition” in the excerpt corresponds to Minkenberg’s point of the

homogeneity of national identity and the incompatibility of certain cultures with French values, here we also see an appropriation of the left's socio-economic material demands.

This two-sided representation synthesises the dynamics of populist borderline discourse (Krzyżanowski and Ledin 2017) between civil or righteous causes with a “civic”-looking repertoire (gender equality and decent labour conditions) and uncivil or unacceptable ideologies (nativism and exclusionary narratives of nationhood). Such strategic equilibrium between normalisation and radicalisation is a good example of the “de-demonisation” strategy that RN has undertaken in the last decade (Ivaldi 2016). Importantly, GNL is excluded from this type of equilibrium discourse.

RN expands the range of “issue framing” to social movements in an attempt to seduce potential sympathisers from out-groups, including the left but excluding segments of society such as people open to arguments in favour of GNL. Simply put, while it is important for the far right to expand its potential support base, this cannot require the abandonment of core beliefs around symbols of national identity such as language.

The constellation of language-feminism-left is at play in the next fragment of an interview in which Marine Le Pen, president of RN, comments on the current political situation:

(4) [Question] You are going to war against inclusive writing by presenting a bill. Do you think equality gets lost on trivial matters?

[Response] This isn't trivial at all, it's downright catastrophic!!! Changing the orthography [writing system] is a crime against the French language. Inclusive writing is crazy. I'm devastated to see that the left has abandoned the fight for those in need and instead promotes an ideological madness like this one. Let's protect French, this wonderful language which is already in decline. (Var-Matin, 5 September 2020)

This quotation encapsulates the projection of the “us” and “them” divide from language to the spheres of policy and politics: standard language is essentialised as the cornerstone of national identity and the nation state; RN represents itself as the champion of linguistic authenticity and real “Frenchness” through policy means; and the focus of the political discourse quickly shifts from trivialising GNL to criticising the ideological agenda of social movements and allegedly defending the conventional economic positions of the left. Thomson (2010, 25) notes that it is the left that argues that “culture wars are a right-wing effort to distract attention from the increasing inequality of income and wealth”. In the excerpt, however, we see the opposite accusation. Indeed, the far right is portraying the left as traitors to the working class and people with material insecurities during the period of economic distress and social dislocation caused by Covid-19. This emphasis on the woes of the working and lower-middle classes, the economic losers from globalisation (Norris and Inglehart 2019), is part of the populist social strategy that RN's mainstream discourse has adopted since Marine Le Pen took on the leadership in 2011 (Stockemer and Barisione 2016).

## **5.2. Struggle against GNL in Spain**

### *The context*

Unlike in France, the use of GNL by governments, organisations and institutional representatives in Spain is more widespread. Figures such as the president and some ministers of the left-leaning coalition government and representatives of regional governments and city councils often use alternative strategies to masculine generics. Like the Académie Française, the Real Academia Española (RAE) has continually refused to accept inclusive alternatives to masculine generics. In 2020, the government's attempts to make the Spanish Constitution linguistically inclusive met with opposition from the RAE (2020), which made it clear that the use of masculine generics in the constitution is "grammatically impeccable", "correct" and "inclusive".

Policy initiatives against the adoption of GNL only began in Spain when candidates of the far-right party Vox were elected to public office in 2018. In Andalusia, the most populous region in Spain, the support of Vox is required by the regional coalition government of two centre-right parties (Partido Popular and Ciudadanos). Here, Vox presented a non-binding law (PNLC-000125, 16 July 2020) that demands

(5) to use only appropriate non-sexist language in the Andalusian administration by following the recommendations of the RAE, which consist in the avoidance of the abusive and unnecessary use of masculine-feminine pairs of so-called "inclusive language".

The law passed with the support of the coalition parties. Unlike RN's latest proposal in 2020 (see Excerpt 1), Vox has not gone so far as to involve the language practices of individuals in their demands, but both far-right parties have opened up a battlefield against GNL.

### *GNL vs freedom from impositions*

Positive self-presentation and negative other-presentation are general characteristics in group conflict (Van Dijk 1997). Ideologically polarised discourses on language or any other cultural issue often contain contrasting structures and meanings such as good/bad actions or values. This point is synthesised in the next extract, which comes from a debate in which Ángela Mulas, Vox's spokesperson in the Andalusian parliament, defends their proposal to stop the use of GNL in the regional administration (see Excerpt 5). Her speech contains references to the authoritative role of the RAE and the beauty, naturalness and common sense of standard language. The following fragment shows Vox's depiction of GNL in comparison with standard language:

(6) You want to make language an ideological instrument to impose your monolithic thinking. With this policy proposal, we don't try to prohibit anyone from speaking as they want in their daily life. But impositions are unacceptable. This isn't common sense; you only seek to establish your ideological dictatorship in all areas of people's lives. This new woke language [*"neolengua progrè"*], consisting of tiresome repetitions of masculine-feminine pairs, is at odds with the nature of language and was invented by activists from minority, though very well organised, pressure groups. Language is not yours, gentlemen [masculine plural, normatively including "ladies"] of the left; it's the heritage of all Spaniards, of all Andalusians. Let it be free, let it be free from tyrannies; let us speak correctly, don't impose anything on us. (16 July 2020)

This quotation exemplifies a contrastive discourse on the subject of language with the value of freedom as a divisive element: *our* group is an expanded "we" that includes Vox and all groups and individuals who value freedom. The other bloc (*their* group, or "you" in the parliamentary debate) is defined by ideology, marked through the use of terms such as "ideological dictatorship", "tyrannies" and "impositions". Vox uses hostile rhetoric, conflict talk and verbal aggressiveness to delegitimise the *others*, including the allusion to "new woke language". In short, GNL is simply an ideological apparatus of the left.

#### *GNL vs ideology-free values and policies*

A look into the representations of language in connection with other ideologically loaded issues that the far right uses as cultural fronts provides examples of the repetition of oppositional structures across different scales (Irvine and Gal 2000). The following quotation is taken from the Senate debate on Agenda 2030 of the United Nations, a plan of action for sustainable development. Jacobo González-Robatto, a senator from Vox, describes the agenda in the following terms:

(7) [It] despises and ignores the value of patriotism, the defence of the nation, border security, the right to be born, the traditional family and the right to convert the fruits of labour into private property (...) [the agenda] is disguised in a politically correct, humanitarian, environmentalist, feminist, *inclusive and sustainable language* that despises social reality and human nature. The agenda has become an ideological document to favour progressive globalism under the cultural hegemony of neo-Marxist doctrines. (6 October 2020; emphasis added)

GNL features as one of a number of tropes that the far right uses in *othering*. This is a good example of the dichotomous display of cultural issues as constellations or groupings of conservative vs progressive values that set a demarcation line between "us" and "them". Following a model based upon rivalry, GNL plays much the same role as some of the far right's central ideological concerns, such as environmentalism and political correctness, representing their opponents, namely neo-Marxists and globalists (Busbridge, Moffitt and Thorburn 2020). Note that although feminism is included in the list in this particular excerpt, RN shows a more nuanced stance on this issue (see Excerpts 2 and 3).

Some of the discourses that include GNL adopt clearly populist undertones. For instance, the following excerpt is from a press release in which Vox criticises the Spanish government's lack of responsiveness to the Covid-19 pandemic and accuses "Brussels bureaucrats" of undermining national sovereignty.

(8) Brussels bureaucrats have endeavoured to fulfil the globalists' wishes by turning Europe into a machine that passes over national parliaments, and minimises or tries to eliminate the principle of representation that is characteristic of our democracies. Besides, the exceptional situation we are living in shows how the left is prone to exaggerate in the media problems that are actually irresolvable (climate change) or absurd ("inclusive language"), which the Spanish right-wing buys without resistance. (16 March 2020)

In this example of anti-Brussels and anti-globalist rhetoric, the environmentalism and GNL are paired as part of the left's strategy of media agitation, but with a significant difference between them. Although the depiction of climate change as an "unsolvable" problem may point to anti-environmental policies, it does not necessarily preclude any of the far right's contradictory approaches to this issue, including environmentally friendly measures (Forchtner 2020). But Vox does not use such strategic ambiguity for GNL, which is represented as "absurd", leaving little room for alternative interpretations. Here and in other instances, the far right regards GNL with disdain.

## **6. Discussion and concluding remarks**

Vox and RN have taken the lead in banishing GNL from governmental contexts (Excerpts 1 and 5). In France, proposed restrictions have expanded to include some language practices of private citizens. The far right's self-appropriation of the role of guardians of the orthodoxy of language at the policy level should be a matter of concern for advocates of standard language and language academies. The analysis shows that the far right treats GNL with sheer contempt. GNL is a new cultural battle for hegemony and a means by which the far right reinforces an irreducible antithesis of friend-enemy. By using conflict talk when referring to language, the far right attacks opponents and delegitimises *the others*, contributing to the widening of the gaps between existing opposing blocs. More importantly, the recurring discursive shifts suggest a strategically orchestrated process wherein the far right has co-opted language into the struggle it pursues on a range of other fronts, which also include a socio-economic orientation. It is precisely in the relationship with other fronts where the use of GNL fuels political hostility and contributes to the culture wars.

Let me elaborate on this idea. Griffin (1999, 316) argues that the far right "takes on highly culture-specific forms, largely because it draws on nationalist myth whose contents are by definition unique to each cultural tradition". This assertion fits well with the far right's use of essentialist conceptions of language such as the notion of "mother tongue" and,

unsurprisingly, Vox and RN's discourse includes values associated with national identity (e.g. authenticity and tradition) in their battle against GNL. Yet, far from appeals to a "nationalist myth" or an idealised image of the nation state, the rejection of GNL by these parties is accompanied by more conventional arguments that refer to a wide range of other issues that the far right associates with advocates of GNL. RN and Vox do not simply act as jealous watchdogs of language. They turn language into a tool for their political purposes. More concretely, they weaponise GNL against the progressive movement as part of their struggle over issues of political and ideological contention (e.g. immigration, feminism, national sovereignty).

Vox's case is straightforward: GNL is just another blunt-force tool in a simple Manichean culture war. Their arguments (Excerpts 6–8), which do not include socio-economic elements, pertain to ultraconservative positions and contain an explicit opposite counterpart (e.g. Brussels bureaucrats, the woke, globalists, neo-Marxists). Vox's exclusive focus on sociocultural issues, including GNL, from a traditionalism/non-traditionalism logic determines the resulting "they" vs "we" agonistic divide. This stark divide captures Hunter's (1991) idea of transcendent culture war as "polarizing impulses" towards orthodox vs progressive representations of ideological understanding.

RN's discourse against GNL is more intricate and obfuscating because a mix of sociocultural and socio-economic aspects are at work. Their rejection of GNL is based on an essentialist approach to language but their discursive focus shifts quickly towards arguments that include functional issues such as national and material security and economic rights (Excerpts 2–4). Certainly, there is an evident component of ethnic nationalism in their allegations that immigrants or Muslims are responsible for women's lack of security (Rydgren 2017). Crime and security are among the issues on which the far right first and foremost competes ideologically and electorally (Akkerman, de Lange and Rooduijn 2016). That said, RN's reaction is not only a cultural backlash. References to economic protection and the working conditions of women, which go hand in hand with the rejection of GNL, seem to indicate the strategic importance of questions other than nationalism and identity, and values other than law and order. RN has a tendency to downplay national identity issues (Ivaldi 2016), and my analysis shows how, in line with this, the party reframes and diverts the message from one with a sociocultural perspective to one with a socio-economic perspective and, more concretely, from the ideologically motivated struggle of feminism and the left (including GNL) to a mere material dimension of women's and workers' struggle.

RN capitalises on GNL to reinvigorate its struggle to be seen as standing for socio-economic issues that are traditionally associated with the left. As Mudde (2007) notes, although socio-economic principles do not determine the core foundation of the far-right ideology, they can be and are instrumentalised to attack competitors and attract voters. Yet, while RN has accentuated economic nationalism in the last decade (Ivaldi 2015), Vox's neoliberal economic programme has remained unchanged since its foundation in 2013 (Ferreiras 2019). Indeed, Vox is a relatively young party in comparison with RN. However, the launch

of Vox's own trade union in 2020 may lead to a shift in their approach to socioeconomic matters in the future.

From a political perspective, RN's strategy can be interpreted as a socio-economic material counteraction against new ideological advances of the cultural left such as GNL. In their view, GNL constitutes a futile and ideologised version of feminism and progressive movements. The valorisation of material values (e.g. economic and physical security) and the devalorisation of post-material ones such as GNL is probably an attempt to counteract the prevalence of post-materialist values in French and other Western publics (Norris and Inglehart 2019). RN's discourse de-ideologises standard language, resignifies the feminist struggle for gender equality and emancipation, appropriates the left's fight against material inequalities, rationalises the scapegoating of immigrants, and normalises the ethnonationalist and nativist nature of their agenda.

To conclude, unlike Vox's more orthodox model of a single and perpetual war based on cultural cleavages, RN's strategy is probably the ultimate form into which culture wars have mutated: interconnected fronts of issues of ideological, political and policy contention that the far right strategically and opportunistically uses. However, as seen above, the view of language held by Vox and RN is not open to revision and likely never will be. The far right's stance on GNL alone is a matter of struggle for policy control and a means for achieving political hostility and the reinforcement of blocs. Vox and RN's struggle against GNL is very recent and the shift in focus from GNL to other issues of contention suggests that GNL is not yet a salient front in the culture wars. Given that language is a core feature that defines the far-right ideology (Wodak 2020), perhaps the battlefield of GNL will occupy a more prominent place in their cultural struggle, the level of which will also depend on the institutional adoption of GNL.

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