

# « *iel* est petit ou petite, ou petit·e? » The challenge of agreement with the French gender neutral pronoun *iel*

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The emergence of gender inclusive language in French caused vivid debates in society and politics. For instance, the decision of the *Petit Robert* dictionary to add the new pronoun *iel* to their online version in 2021 (and to their 2023 paper edition) was met with severe criticism (Carrier & Chicoine, 2022). Use of the pronoun *iel* also raises questions concerning agreement on past participles, as well as on adjectival and nominal predicates, as illustrated in (1).

(1) <i>iel</i>	<i>est</i>	a) <i>petit</i>	b) <i>petite</i>
3sg.neut	is	small.m	small.f

Neither masculine (1a) nor feminine agreement (1b) seem to be fully appropriate, as they do not convey the inclusive nature of the pronoun *iel*. As is assumed in French normative grammar, the masculine form could be considered generic, but a plethora of studies have shown that this generic masculine triggers a male bias and, thus, is not really neutral (Tibblin et al., 2023).

Alternative agreement forms to combine with *iel* have been proposed. These range from forms involving different typographical markers, for instance the *point médian* in (2a), to create new compound forms that fuse the masculine and feminine forms, to the adoption of new morphological endings, such as -x in (2b) (Kaplan, 2022, for discussion of several proposals).

(2) ? <i>iel</i>	<i>est</i>	a) <i>petit·e</i>	b) <i>petix</i>
3sg.neut	is	small.m.f	small.neut

However, typographical strategies such as the *point médian* face severe criticism (Viennot, 2022); as to the new morphological forms, it is unclear whether these will eventually integrate into the grammar system (Le Tallec-Lloret, 2020).

While several studies have addressed the topic of inclusive language for French from several perspectives, including new pronoun forms such as *iel*, the issue of agreement has not been studied in a systematic manner yet. Díaz & Heap (2020), using a corpus of examples extracted from Twitter, show that alternative forms are used in several Francophone regions. Yet, their study does not specifically focus on agreement with *iel*, but discusses a wide variety of inclusive forms, also covering articles, pronouns, and nouns.

Therefore, the present contribution aims at providing a systematic investigation of agreement with *iel* on adjectival and nominal predicates, and past participles. Using the online tool *SketchEngine* (Kilgariff et al., 2014), a corpus containing cases of agreement with *iel* (and its plural form *iels*) is compiled, extracted from French web pages from France and other Francophone regions. Analysis of the data shows that in about half of the cases, alternative agreement forms are used, in particular those involving typographical strategies such as the *point médian*. Yet, traditional masculine and feminine forms also represent a considerable part of the examples. This sheds more light onto how new gender inclusive pronoun forms may integrate into the language system.

## References

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