

The French pronoun *iel* on Twitter: a gendered use of a non-gendered form?

Yanis Da Cunha, Liam Duignan, Anne Abeillé

LLF, Université Paris Cité

Germanic human sing. non-binary pronouns (*they*, *hen*) expand their generic use, raising sociolinguistic (evolution against the norm, cf. Bodine, 1975) and theoretical questions (gender place and values in the feature hierarchy, cf. Bjorkman, 2017), while little is known about Romance (*elle* in Spanish, *elu* in Portuguese). For Canadian French, Diaz (2021) found very few neopronouns (2% of all inclusive forms) on Twitter (May 2020). We focus here on French *iel*; coined by non-binary persons to refer to themselves around 2008 (Greco, 2015), it entered the Robert dictionary in 2021 as a ‘subject 3rd pers. pronoun to evoke a person whatever their gender’. We searched Twitter, which has metadata about speaker’s gender, and which has ‘iel’ in its guidelines, with the *rtweet* R package (Kearney, 2019). Using *search_fullarchive*, we compiled all tweets over one day (June 1st) in 2020, 2021 and 2022, extracting all French tweets containing *iel(s)* ‘they’, *il(s) et/ou elle(s)* ‘he or/and she’, excluding retweets. We see an increase of *iel(s)* (496 in 2020, 688 in 2021, 795 in 2022), always outnumbering *il(s) et/ou elle(s)* (resp. 88, 83 and 131). We randomly sampled 300 *iel(s)* tweets for each year, excluding 36 irrelevant ones, yielding a sample of 864 tweets, plus 281 *il(s) et/ou elle(s)* tweets. In addition to Twitter metadata, we annotated grammatical number and function, agreement pattern (where applicable), type of use (sarcastic, metalinguistic, generic, group-referent, non-binary). Despite *iel(s)*’s dominant subject use (88%), we found some instances of predicative (*C’est iel* ‘it is them’) (4%) and prepositional complements (*avec iel* ‘with them’) (2%), where it competes with strong forms (*ellui*, *elleux*).

User gender	2020		2021		2022	
Female	20/48	23.7%	36/24	20.7%	27/39	23%
Non binary	13/44	19.9%	13/14	9.3%	10/12	7.7%
Non binary female	11/18	10.1%	11/13	8.3%	6/5	3.8%
Male	6/10	5.6%	11/10	6.9%	21/17	13.2%
Non binary male	6/9	5.2%	14/11	8.6%	10/2	4.2%
Any	5/8	4.5%	8/10	6.2%	5/4	3.1%
Unknown	33/56	31%	63/52	40%	77/52	44.9%
Total	94/193	100.0%	156/134	100.0%	154/133	100.0%

Table 1. Number of *iel/iels* in tweet samples by user gender and year.

Despite the number of ‘unknown’, we found that *iel(s)* users identifying as female (23% in 2022) are stable and outnumber those that identify as male while (self-declared) non-binary users form a decreasing minority (15.7% in 2022) (Table 1). We also found an increase in singular *iel* (32% in 2020, 53% in 2021 and 2022).

Type of use	2020		2021		2022	
Generic (<i>iel</i>)	64/0	22.3%	89/0	30,9%	52/0	18,1%
Metalinguistic	5/3	2.8%	31/3	11,8%	32/5	12,9%
Sarcastic	4/1	1.7%	5/2	2,4%	9/2	3,8%

Non-binary	18/14	11.1%	25/7	10,4%	56/1	19,9%
Ungendered	3/1	1.4%	6/1	2,4%	5/0	1,7%
Group (iels)	0/174	60.6%	0/121	42,0%	0/125	43,6%
Total	94/193	100.0%	156/134	100.0%	154/133	100.0%

Table 2. Number of *iel/iels* in tweet samples by type of use and year.

Table 2 shows that most users employ *iel* not to refer to non-binary persons (1) (only 14.4%) but rather to mixed groups (2) (54.4%), possibly as a strategy to overcome the male bias associated with the ‘generic’ masculine (Gygax et al., 2008). We also see a slight decrease of generic uses (3) (22.5%), and a slight increase in metalinguistic (4) (5.9%) and sarcastic uses, likely due to the French media controversy in 2021.

(1) *mais iel est non binaire, désolé* ‘but they_{.SG} are non binary_{.SG}, sorry’

(2) *J’ai failli parler des philosophes [...] généralement iels disent juste des trucs perchés* ‘I almost mentioned philosophers, usually they_{.PL} just say crazy things’

(3) *ne pas sortir avec quelqu’un parce qu’iel est bi c’est de la biphobie* ‘Not dating someone because they_{.SG} are bisexual it’s biphobia’

(4) *dans moins de dix ans iel passera comme tout le reste* ‘In less than 10 years, *iel* will be accepted like everything else’

By comparison, for *il(s) et/ou elle(s)*, we found no non-binary use and 58% generic use. Regarding agreement, the most common form is inclusive for sing. *iel* (44%, *iel est trop nul.le*_{INCLUSIVE} ‘they_{.SG} are too dumb’), while it is balanced between inclusive and masculine for plur. *iels* (both 34%, *iels sont lourds*_{M.PL} ‘they_{.PL} are heavy’).

Type of use	Female		Male		Non binary		Other	
Generic	55/0	28.5%	18/0	24.0%	16/0	15.1%	38/1	25.0%
Metalinguistic	13/1	7.3%	9/0	12.0%	6/1	6.6%	11/1	7.7%
Non-binary	13/0	6.7%	11/2	17.3%	13/2	14.2%	27/7	21.8%
Group (iels)	0/111	57.5%	0/35	46.7%	0/68	64.2%	0/71	45.5%
Total	81/112	100.0%	38/37	100.0%	35/71	100.0%	76/80	100.0%

Table 3. Number of *iel/iels* in tweet samples by type of use and user gender.

Looking at a subset without unknown-gender users (Table 3), we found most (36%) *iel(s)* users declare themselves as women, while non-binary speakers represent 20% and men 12%. We observe a link between gender and type of use: mixed group *iels* is used more by women (57%) than men (46%), while non-binary *iel* is more popular among non-binary speakers (21%) compared to men or women (17/7%). This result is in line with Gygax et al. (2008) who found women to be more sensitive to the male bias of plural masculine generic (*les promeneurs* ‘the walkers’) and with Stetie & Zunino (2022) who found a stronger male only interpretation for women than for men, reading Spanish masculine -os compared to inclusive (-es, -xs) forms. We conclude *iel(s)*’s reference outnumbers *il(s) et/ou elle(s)* by far and is evolving from non-binary to generic/mixed groups. **Selected references** Diaz Y., 2021, Un regard sur le français inclusif canadien dans une journée de Twitter, *ACL*. Gygax P. et al 2008. Generically intended, but specifically interpreted, *LCP* 23(3). 464–485. Stetie, N. & Zunino, G., 2022. Non-binary language in Spanish? Comprehension of non-binary morphological forms, *Glossa*: 7(1).