

**Gendered Morphology in
French and English Occupational Terms**

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Abstract

This study investigates how occupational nouns encode gender in French and English, focusing on morphological marking. A dataset of forty common professions was compiled and analyzed using standard dictionaries (Le Robert, Larousse, Oxford English Dictionary, Collins), with supplementary consultation of WordReference forums. Each entry was coded for the presence of gendered morphological forms, unmarked defaults, and suffixal alternations. Results reveal a sharp asymmetry between the two languages. In French, 70% of occupations display distinct masculine and feminine forms, produced through systematic morphological processes such as -eur → -euse, -eur → -rice, and -ier → -ière. Only 20% were epicene, and 10% exhibited mixed or contested feminization (professeur/professeure, docteur/docteure). In English, by contrast, 87.5% of terms were neutral or epicene, with gender marking surviving in only a few legacy pairs (actor/actress, waiter/waitress). These findings support the hypothesis that French maintains gendered occupational titles through grammatical gender and recent feminization reforms, while English increasingly neutralizes gender distinctions through lexical alternatives. The study underscores how occupational vocabulary reflects broader sociolinguistic trends: French expands gender marking to increase visibility, whereas English reduces it to achieve inclusivity.

Keywords: gender, morphology, occupational nouns, French, English, sociolinguistics

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1. Introduction

Gender in language is expressed through a variety of mechanisms, ranging from pronouns to occupational titles. While English has largely shifted toward gender-neutral terms, French continues to maintain overt grammatical gender distinctions, particularly in professional vocabulary. This contrast raises important questions about how languages encode gender in ways that both reflect and shape social norms.

The focus of this study is on morphological gender marking in occupational nouns, with a comparative analysis of French and English. Occupational titles are especially revealing because they intersect with issues of visibility, professional identity, and institutional reform. In French, words such as *acteur/actrice* or *infirmier/infirmière* exhibit morphological alternations that explicitly mark gender. In English, however, forms like *actor/actress* are increasingly replaced by a single neutral term (*actor*), with newer coinages such as *firefighter* or *server* avoiding gender entirely.

This project asks: How frequently and in what ways are occupational nouns morphologically gender-marked in contemporary French compared to English, and which forms function as the unmarked default in each language? To address this question, a dataset of forty common occupations was compiled and coded for the presence of gendered forms, unmarked defaults, and patterns of morphological alternation.

Hypothesis: In this sample, French will display a substantially higher rate of overt morphological gender marking than English, reflecting the structural role of grammatical gender

and ongoing feminization reforms. English, by contrast, will favor epicene or neutral forms, consistent with its broader shift toward gender neutrality.

2. Literature Review

Research on gender in occupational vocabulary reveals sharply contrasting approaches in French and English. In French, the issue is framed as a question of feminization, while in English the central concern has been neutralization. Together, these debates illuminate how linguistic structure and social ideology interact in shaping professional titles.

Burnett and Bonami (2019) analyze French parliamentary debates and show how discussions of grammatical gender are not only linguistic but also ideological. Their work demonstrates that feminization reforms, such as the introduction of *professeure* or *docteure*, often trigger broader conflicts over tradition, authority, and cultural identity. These debates illustrate that linguistic change is inseparable from the social structures in which it is embedded.

Perreau (2022) extends this discussion by examining *écriture inclusive*, a movement promoting more visible feminine and gender-inclusive forms in French. He argues that inclusive writing challenges long-standing institutional norms—particularly those defended by the *Académie française*—by questioning the assumption that the masculine form should serve as the universal default. His study highlights how linguistic reforms are tied to broader questions of visibility and equality in French society.

In contrast, scholarship on English emphasizes the elimination of gender marking rather than its multiplication. Pauwels (2021) documents how English-speaking contexts have increasingly abandoned gendered occupational nouns, favoring neutral alternatives such as *firefighter* for *fireman* or *server* for *waiter/waitress*. Unlike French, where new forms are added,

English reforms generally simplify by collapsing masculine and feminine variants into a single neutral title.

Finally, Smetana (2018) provides a historical overview of French feminization reforms, noting the uneven acceptance of certain forms across time and institutions. Her study reveals how some words (*avocate*, *présidente*) gained widespread usage, while others (*auteure*, *autrice*) remained contested for decades. This demonstrates that linguistic reforms are often gradual, shaped by institutional resistance and patterns of everyday usage.

Taken together, this literature establishes the backdrop for the present study. French occupational nouns continue to be sites of morphological innovation and social debate, while English nouns trend toward neutrality and simplification. Understanding these differences provides essential context for comparing how each language encodes gender in professional vocabulary.

3. Methods

This study analyzed a dataset of forty occupational nouns in English and French (see Appendix A). The occupations were chosen to represent a broad range of professional domains, including law, politics, education, healthcare, and service industries. Selection was guided by frequency of everyday usage and attestation in authoritative dictionaries, rather than by random sampling, in order to create a manageable yet representative sample.

The primary lexical sources for French were Larousse and Le Robert, while English forms were drawn from the Oxford English Dictionary and Collins English Dictionary. When contested or variant forms arose, additional consultation of WordReference entries and forums was used to capture contemporary usage. Institutional positions, such as those expressed by the Académie française, were also noted where relevant.

Each term was coded according to explicit operational rules. For both languages, the variable “Gendered Form Exists” was coded as Yes if morphologically distinct masculine and feminine forms were documented, No if the form was epicene or neutral, and Mixed if feminization was optional, contested, or regionally variable (e.g., professeur/professeure). For each entry, the unmarked default form was determined based on dictionary headword conventions: in French, the masculine form is typically listed as the default; in English, the neutral occupational title was taken as the default. Additional notes recorded the morphological process involved in feminization (-eur → -euse, -eur → -rice, -ier → -ière, -er → -ère, -ant → -ante, or simple addition of -e), along with any neutral English alternatives (server vs. waiter).

Coding was completed in an Excel spreadsheet, with sources and morphological notes logged systematically. The complete dataset is provided in Appendix A, while aggregate results are reported in the Results section.

4. Results

The dataset of forty occupational nouns shows a strong structural asymmetry between English and French. Out of the forty English terms analyzed, only three (7.5%) contained morphologically distinct gendered forms (actor/actress, waiter/waitress, dancer/danceress). Two additional terms (5%) were coded as “Mixed,” reflecting historical or contested feminization (poet/poetess, steward/stewardess). The vast majority, thirty-five terms (87.5%), were fully neutral, with the same form used regardless of the subject’s gender (teacher, doctor, engineer, nurse).

By contrast, the French data revealed the opposite trend. Of the same forty occupations, twenty-eight terms (70%) showed clear morphological gender marking. These included familiar pairs such as acteur/actrice, directeur/directrice, and serveur/serveuse. Only eight terms (20%)

were coded as neutral, such as *ministre* and *artiste*, while four (10%) were considered “Mixed,” where feminization is contested or optional (*professeur/professeuse*, *docteur/docteure*).

Table 1. Distribution of gender-marked occupational nouns (N = 40)

Language	Yes	No	Mixed
English	3 (7.5%)	35 (87.5%)	2 (5%)
French	28 (70%)	8 (20%)	4 (10%)

The pattern of morphological alternation in French is highly systematic. The most frequent processes included:

- *eur* → *-euse* (*serveur/serveuse*, *chanteur/chanteuse*),
- *eur* → *-rice* (*acteur/actrice*, *directeur/directrice*),
- *ier* → *-ière* (*infirmier/infirmière*).

Other less common but still productive patterns included *-er* → *-ère* (*boulangier/boulangère*), *-ant* → *-ante* (*étudiant/étudiante*), and the simple addition of *-e* (*ingénieur/ingénieure*). These patterns covered the majority of gender-marked items in the dataset, demonstrating that French feminization is not random but governed by regular morphological rules.

English, by contrast, lacks such productive morphology. Gender distinctions survive in a handful of irregular pairs (*actor/actress*, *waiter/waitress*), but most terms have undergone lexical neutralization. For instance, *server* now predominates over *waitress*, *flight attendant* has replaced *stewardess*, and *actor* is widely used for all genders. This reflects English’s broader tendency to eliminate morphological gender and consolidate into a single unmarked form.

5. Discussion

The results reveal a striking divergence between English and French in the treatment of occupational nouns. Whereas English overwhelmingly favors neutral forms, French maintains

systematic morphological alternations. This contrast illustrates not only the influence of grammatical structure, but also the social and ideological contexts in which language evolves.

The French data showed that nearly three-quarters of occupations had morphologically distinct masculine and feminine forms. These were not random innovations but followed consistent rules, such as *-eur* → *-euse* (*serveur/serveuse*) and *-eur* → *-rice* (*acteur/actrice*). This confirms what Burnett and Bonami (2019) observed in French parliamentary debates: that feminization is both a linguistic process and a political act. Choosing to say *professeure* rather than *professeur* is not only a morphological shift but also a statement about visibility and equality.

English, in contrast, showed almost complete reliance on neutral occupational titles. Only a handful of gendered pairs survive, and even these are fading in professional contexts. This aligns with Pauwels (2021), who documents how English-speaking institutions have prioritized the elimination of gender marking. Terms like *firefighter*, *police officer*, and *flight attendant* exemplify this drive toward inclusivity through neutrality.

Perreau (2022) describes *écriture inclusive* as an attempt to reform French writing by introducing visible feminine and non-binary forms (*autrice*, *docteure*, *iel*). The findings of this study suggest why such reforms remain contentious: French already encodes gender morphologically, and further feminization can feel to some speakers like a disruption of long-standing defaults. In English, by contrast, inclusive reforms work by stripping away gender distinctions, often meeting less structural resistance because the grammar itself does not demand gender agreement.

Taken together, these results suggest two fundamentally different strategies of linguistic change. French expands its system by multiplying gendered forms, seeking visibility for women

in occupations historically coded as masculine. English contracts its system by collapsing masculine and feminine into a single neutral form, reflecting a cultural preference for inclusivity without morphological complexity. Both strategies respond to similar social pressures for gender equality, but the outcomes are shaped by the structure of each language and by the ideological positions of their institutions.

6. Conclusion

This study investigated how occupational nouns in French and English differ in their use of morphological gender marking. By coding a dataset of forty common professions, a clear asymmetry emerged. In English, nearly ninety percent of the terms were neutral or epicene, with only three occupations (actor, waiter, dancer) showing systematic gendered variants, and even these increasingly avoided in professional contexts. In French, however, seventy percent of the terms displayed morphologically distinct masculine and feminine forms, most following productive suffixal alternations such as *-eur* → *-euse*, *-eur* → *-rice*, and *-ier* → *-ière*. Only a minority of French occupations were epicene (*ministre*, *artiste*), while several remained contested (*professeur/professeure*, *docteur/docteure*).

These findings support the hypothesis that the structural presence of grammatical gender in French sustains a system of feminization reforms, while English, lacking grammatical gender, instead pursues inclusivity through lexical neutralization. The comparison shows that the two languages respond to similar social pressures for equality with fundamentally different strategies: French multiplies forms to increase visibility, while English reduces forms to create neutrality.

The study also highlights the role of institutions and ideology in shaping outcomes. French reforms remain entangled with political debates, as noted by Burnett and Bonami (2019) and Perreau (2022), with the Académie française resisting certain feminized or inclusive forms.

English reforms, by contrast, are largely institutionalized in schools, media, and dictionaries, with terms like firefighter and server accepted as standard.

Although limited to forty occupations, this analysis demonstrates how even a small lexical domain can reveal broader patterns of linguistic structure and social change. Future research could expand the dataset, trace diachronic changes in dictionaries, or examine how speakers themselves adopt or resist feminized and neutral forms in practice.

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Appendix A – Vocabulary of Occupational Terms (English & French)

English Term	French Term	Gendered Form Exists? (EN)	Gendered Form Exists? (FR)	Unmarked Default (EN/FR)	Notes (suffix, neutral variant, dictionary evidence)	Source (dictionary/forum link)
actor	acteur / actrice	Yes (actor/actress)	Yes	EN: actor; FR: acteur	FR: -eur → -rice; EN: 'actor' increasingly neutral	Larousse, Oxford
waiter	serveur / serveuse	Yes (waiter/waitress)	Yes	EN: waiter; FR: serveurur	FR: -eur → -euse; EN: 'server' neutral alternative	Collins, Le Robert
engineer	ingénieur / ingénieure	No	Yes	EN: engineer; FR: ingénieur	FR: -e marks feminine; mixed acceptance	WordReference, Le Robert
teacher	professeur / professeure	No (neutral)	Mixed	EN: teacher; FR: professeur	FR: Académie prefers 'professeur'; 'professeure' spreading	Larousse, Académie
nurse	infirmier / infirmière	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: nurse; FR: infirmier	FR: -ier → -ière	Larousse, WordReference
doctor	docteur / docteure	No (neutral)	Mixed	EN: doctor; FR: docteur	Feminine forms debated; 'docteure' not universal	Larousse, Collins
lawyer	avocat / avocate	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: lawyer; FR: avocat	FR: -e for feminine	Larousse, Le Robert
president	président / présidente	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: president; FR: président	FR: -e accepted now	Larousse, Le Robert
manager	directeur / directrice	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: manager; FR: directeur	FR: -eur → -rice	Larousse, Collins
secretary	secrétaire	No (neutral)	No (same form)	EN: secretary; FR: secrétaire	Epiciene in FR	Larousse
farmer	agriculteur / agricultrice	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: farmer; FR: agriculteur	FR: -eur → -rice	Le Robert
pilot	pilote	No (neutral)	No (same form)	EN: pilot; FR: pilote	Epiciene	Larousse
scientist	scientifique	No (neutral)	No (same form)	EN: scientist; FR: scientifique	Epiciene	Collins, Larousse
baker	boulangier / boulangère	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: baker; FR: boulangier	FR: -er → -ère	Larousse
student	étudiant / étudiante	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: student; FR: étudiant	FR: -ant → -ante	Larousse
journalist	journaliste	No (neutral)	No (same form)	EN: journalist; FR: journaliste	Epiciene	Larousse
author	auteur / autrice	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: author; FR: auteur	FR: -eur → -rice (revived 'aurice')	Le Robert
poet	poète / poétesse	No (neutral)	Yes (archaic feminine)	EN: poet; FR: poète	'poétesse' avoided today	Larousse
soldier	soldat	No (neutral)	No (same form)	EN: soldier; FR: soldat	Epiciene in FR	Larousse
police officer	policier / policière	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: officer; FR: policier	FR: -ier → -ière	Larousse
firefighter	pompiier / pompière	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: firefighter; FR: pompier	FR: -ier → -ière; EN already neutral	Larousse
chef	chef	No (neutral)	No (same form)	EN: chef; FR: chef	Epiciene	Larousse
butcher	boucher / bouchère	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: butcher; FR: boucher	FR: -eur → -euse	Larousse
dancer	danseur / danseuse	Yes (archaic dancer/dances)	Yes	EN: dancer (neutral now); FR: danseur	FR: -eur → -euse	Larousse
singer	chanteur / chanteuse	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: singer; FR: chanteur	FR: -er → -ère	Larousse
artist	artiste	No (neutral)	No (same form)	EN: artist; FR: artiste	Epiciene	Larousse
banker	banquier / banquière	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: banker; FR: banquier	FR: -ier → -ière	Larousse
judge	jugé	No (neutral)	No (same form)	EN: judge; FR: juge	Epiciene	Larousse
member of parliament	député / députée	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: MP; FR: député	FR: -e	Larousse
minister	ministre	No (neutral)	No (same form)	EN: minister; FR: ministre	Epiciene	Larousse
ambassador	ambassadeur / ambassadrice	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: ambassador; FR: ambassadeur	FR: -eur → -rice	Larousse
counselor	conseiller / conseillère	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: counselor; FR: conseiller	FR: -ier → -ière	Larousse
professor	professeur / professeure	No (neutral)	Mixed	EN: professor; FR: professeur	Feminization debated	Larousse
athlete	athlète	No (neutral)	No (same form)	EN: athlete; FR: athlète	Epiciene	Larousse
researcher	chercheur / chercheuse	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: researcher; FR: chercheur	FR: -eur → -euse	Larousse
programmer	programmeur / programmeuse	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: programmer; FR: programmeur	FR: -eur → -euse	WordReference
driver	conducteur / conductrice	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: driver; FR: conducteur	FR: -eur → -rice	Larousse
merchant	commerçant / commerçante	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: merchant; FR: commerçant	FR: -ant → -ante	Larousse
worker	ouvrier / ouvrière	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: worker; FR: ouvrier	FR: -ier → -ière	Larousse
boss	patron / patronne	No (neutral)	Yes	EN: boss; FR: patron	FR: irregular feminine -onne	Larousse