

# Let Me Speak! - Interruption in the French Parliament

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## 1 Introduction

In 2012, Cécile Duflot, the Minister for Housing, a former ecologist female MP, was booed as she was advancing to take the floor in the French Assembly. The reason was her flower dress and the fact that MPs were not used to see her in a dress. This day, the debate could not go on anymore because of the laughing.<sup>1</sup>

Such interruptions are an hindrance to democracy. These remarks do not bring anything to the debate and rather, interrupt it. Besides, women, as in this example, may be particularly the target of such interruptions and not be judged on their talent but on other subjective and irrelevant for democracy factors.

Interruptions during parliamentary debates are a powerful and aggressive way to disturb the speaker, while conveying ideas and opinions in a shock manner. They may particularly be used by opposition parties to bring forward opinions or to media attention a particular subject or used by the governing party, to express support to an opinion.

The use of interruptions to silence women and discredit their expertise has been increasingly highlighted in social and traditional media by referring to these types of interruptions as maninterrupting - unnecessary interruption of a woman by a man (Bennett 2015, Bridges 2017). This issue of maninterrupting can be a show of dominance and power which men can utilize to silence their female counterparts.

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<sup>1</sup>Source : Website of the Guardian, Sunday 12 July 2012

Using the French Assemblée Nationale as a case study, I consider if (a) women are subject to interruptions in the Assemblée Nationale and (b) which words are used.

The issue of interruption between men and women has been long studied. For example, Georgali-dou (2017) draws on data from video-recordings, the official proceedings of parliamentary sittings, and the media (2012–2015) and found that women are subject to sexist aggression and derogative forms of addresses in the Greek parliament. Likewise, Stopfner (2018) shows that in the Canadian, German, and British House of Commons, women are frequently subject to interruptions targeting their appearance, competence, gender roles, or personal traits. Collier and Raney (2018) draw on some case study and analyze the lower Houses in Australia, the United Kingdom, and Canada and find that women are subject to sexist heckles, taunts, and shouting.

However, all these papers suffer from a limit, most of them are case study which draw particular quotes from the vast amount of debates. Even if such remarks are unacceptable, it may be also wise to see the broader picture and make use of the new tools of programming such as textual data analysis. Manually processing and organizing text data takes time, it's tedious and inaccurate, and is almost impossible for long text data such as debates. Using programming techniques, I extract valuable insights from unstructured text data debates in the French Assembly.

## **2 The French Assembly in France**

### **2.1 Elections of Members of Parliament in France**

The two-round majority system in 577 constituencies used for National Assembly elections foresees that a candidate is elected to the next round if he/she received an absolute majority of the votes. If not, the most frequent case, a second round is organized with candidates who received at least 12.5% of the vote and want to continue the race. Members of Parliament are elected for five-years. The election for MPs take place just after the presidential race give a substantial advantage to big and/or allied parties and to the winner of the presidential election (Blais and Loewen (2009)). It has contributed to the fact that, since 2002, the leading party has obtained an absolute majority of the seats in the Assembly. This is however not the case anymore with the election of 2022, the

leading party (Renaissance) has only 250 seats of the 289 needed to have the majority.

Resulting from the national and majoritarian feature of parliamentary elections, party unity is high in parliamentary politics. It has been calculated that dissent votes within the majority group in the National Assembly were inferior to 2 percent of the recorded votes (Lecomte and Rozenberg (2021)).

You can find in the table 1 the number of seats each party has in the French Assembly as of 2022.

## 2.2 A planetary session

A planetary session has a predicted order<sup>2</sup>.

At the start of the session, the first person to speak is the President of the Assembly. Six Vice-presidents alternate with her the Presidency of the Assembly, to ensure that every party inside the Assembly is represented.

A public discussion is held once the text has been placed on the agenda. This begins as a general discussion, with several participants: a member of the Government present the bill, and then rapporteur, the person who followed the bill in the committee, present the opinion of the Committee. MPs who, either in the name of their group or as individuals would like to indicate their point of view, can speak. After this first discussion, the Assembly examines the articles one by one, along with any amendments that may be attached to each. When all the articles have been examined and passed, a vote on the entire bill of law is taken.

Political groups may sometimes intervene before the vote to explain a particular position.

## 3 Literature review

Recent research examine the extent to which women face more interruption than men in their speeches.

In her work on the German Bundestag, Och (2020) finds that women to to be more likely

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<sup>2</sup>Source : Website of the Assemblée Nationale

interrupted than men and that men are more likely to question a woman’s professionalism and qualifications than their expertise. However, in the German case, it seems that women not only are not silenced by their male colleagues in parliamentary debates but also by female MPs who have learned to utilize interruptions as a regular part of parliamentary debate behavior. Using original data on legislative debates in Ecuador between 1988 and 2018, Vallejo Vera and Gómez Vidal (2022) examine patterns of speech for all lawmakers, and consider how interruptions affect them. They find that women are less likely to be interrupted than men but interruptions silence women at a higher rate. To avoid the consequence of interruptions in the long term, women strategically limit their floor time. In contrast, men speak for longer after being interrupted, suggesting they care less about interruptions. Blumenau (2021) exploit time variation in the gender of cabinet ministers in the UK British House of Commons to assess the effect of the appointment of female ministers in responsiveness during legislative debates. Female ministers are much more responsive than their male counterparts to female legislators. Importantly, gendered effects vanish in ministerial interactions with male legislators. Bisbee et al. (2022) use the debate between the Federal Reserve and the Senate Committee on Banking to show that U.S. politicians were more likely to yell at Janet Yellen despite her outstanding career record and interact with her with a more aggressive language. They also show that having at least a daughter significantly reduces the aggressiveness against Janet Yellen.

In an interesting and challenging contribution, Dietrich et al. (2019) examine the nonverbal aspects of legislative debate. More specifically, the authors tap into women’s vocal pitch measured as ‘small deviations above or below a speaker’s baseline vocal pitch’ – to gauge whether women are more emotionally engaged when they speak about topics that matter to them. Looking at the US Congress, evidence from both text-as-data and audio suggests that women tend to be more emotionally engaged while talking about women-related topics.

This literature review concludes that the frequency of interruptions and their effect on women clearly depend on the culture and the context of the Congress. As a large conclusion, there seems to be man interrupting in Parliaments but which can be more or less direct.

I argue that a study case of France could be interesting. First, interruptions are more com-

mon than in other countries. All MPs, whether men or women, are used to react to interruptions. Secondly, the case of Cécile Duflot and her flower dress has also highlighted the problem of man-  
terruption in the Parliament: men may have changed their behaviour since 2012. Thirdly, two laws have been enacted for gender equality in politics and to strengthen parity of representation in politics. In 2000, a law provides for mandatory equality of candidacies for list elections and even alternation of candidates of each sex on the lists. In 2007, this law was supplemented by the obligation that candidates must have a substitute of the opposite sex.<sup>3</sup> Thus, political figures in France are used to interacting with people of different sexes.

## 4 Definitions

A definition of intervention and interruption is needed in this study.

An 'interruption' occurs every time a non-legitimate speaker intervenes in the formal talk of another Member of Parliament (henceforth MP) without being invited to, that is when an MP takes an intrusive role in order to modify or determine events or their outcome. 'Questions' and 'short interventions' are not interrupting patterns, since they have to be expressly allowed by the President of the Assembly. The data already include information if the intervention is an interruption or not. Interruptions are frequent in the Assemblée Nationale, with a total of 4829 interruptions across 34 debates.

I name on the contrary intervention the opposite of an interruption. It can be either a speech, any remark or allocution of the President of the Assemblée, the presentation of a rapporteur or a question approved by the President of the Assemblée. They are all allowed and seen as generic speech by the Assemblée.

## 5 Data

The French law states that the debates must be open to the public. Besides debates being public and broadcasted on the television, the French Assembly also provide all texts on the website

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<sup>3</sup>Source : Official website Vie-publique.fr

data.assemblee-nationale.fr. The files provides information on the name of the speaker, his status (MP, Minister, President of the Assembly, rapporteur of a commission...), if he is delivering a discourse or interrupting the debate, the time when he began to speak and the text of his intervention. We further have information on Assembly movements during an intervention : if some parties are laughing, booing, applauding or approving what is being said.

This study is done with the 34 debates in 16 days which happened during sommer 2022.<sup>4</sup> Summer 2022 is particularly an interesting case. Usually not much happen during summer in French politics because of holidays, but this year, because the government was finally set after long debates (due to the minority government), some really important debates took place, with for example one debate about purchasing power measures.

the debates are more representative as what happened between This summer was marked by a number of heated debates about health monitoring system and purchasing power measures

I discard every intervention of the President of the Assembly, since the President of the Assembly either opens and closes the debates, gives the floor to a speaker or call for calm. Such interventions could hinder our analysis if the number of allocations of the President of the Assembly is included. However, they do not bring any information to the debate.

We combine this dataset with the list of every MPs, also provided by the website data.assemblee-nationale.fr, which gives us the party they belong to.

## 6 Empirical strategy

Our key question is whether manterruption can be considered a symbolic violence against women in politics. To be considered a form of violence, manterruptions need to impede women's ability to their representative functions.

Following the methodology of Och (2020), I test three hypotheses. First, if women are more frequently interrupted than men. To test this hypothesis, I use, as Och (2020), descriptive statistics.

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<sup>4</sup>This choice is first pragmatic : in the context of the Computational Social Science lecturee, I chose to invest time in building a solid program and paper. Having a larger dataset would be better for scientific purposes, but would also mean larger computation time. If the project is extended, I would work with every debate I have access to.

Second, I test if women are more likely to be subject to interpersonal attacks than attacks based on their competence. To test this hypothesis, we use wordclouds and feature-occurrence matrix. Wordclouds help us understand which words are used and by whom. This will helps us understand which words are used and by whom. Feature-occurrence graphs are highly useful when it comes to displaying the relationships that words have among each other and which properties these networks of words have.

## 7 Are women more likely to be interrupted or to interrupt?

In total, 3848 representatives spoke across all 34 debates (1208 women and 2039 men) and 4829 interruptions occurred. On plot 1, it can be seen that partys are really attentive to let women take the floor and that the share of women taking the floor is quite representative of the share of women in the French Assembly. However, when looking at interruptions, plot 2, the picture is entirely different. For most parties, men interrupt disproportionately more than women. The only exception is for the party La France Insoumise<sup>5</sup>, where women MPs than their male counterparts, given than only a third of this party MPs are women.

To test the first hypothesis that women will be more frequently interrupted than men, I count the number of times female speakers are interrupted when they hold the floor.

Table 3 provide us an answer : interestingly, male MPs have the tendency to interrupt more their male counterparts than women. In 84% of cases, they interrupt their male counterparts. Women seem to have more freedom to interrupt their female counterparts, but do not hesitate to interrupt as well their male counterparts, because in 61% of cases, they interrupt their male counterparts. However, women do interrupt less than men because only 17% of interruptions are done by a woman (table 10.2).

Only 18% of the interruptions concerned women, which is lower than the number of times they took the floor (32% of cases, table 10.2). Thus, we cannot confirm the first hypothesis : women are not more frequently interrupted than men. Interruptions of female speakers by male colleagues is

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<sup>5</sup>Traduction : The Insubordinate France

only an indicator of regular debate behaviour. Or rather, it could be that male MPs are afraid to interrupt a woman.

## 8 Words used to interrupt

Secondly, I test if women may be subject to interpersonal attacks rather than attacks on the subject they deliver. In order to test this hypothesis, I look at the word used by both men and women when they interact with each other. At a first glance, most used words are really similar. Everyone use "no", "yes", "all", "right" (part of the expression "you are right")

Interestingly, both men and women seem to be more careful when they interrupt a woman. A common address for women is to call her "Madame" (*madam*) which is more courteous than just to shout. This is not the case for men (no presence of "monsieur"). Another noticeable difference is the fact that men seem to prefer short sentences to women which mark quicker their opinion. The most used words are words commonly used in short sentences ("tout", "vrai", "faux", "fait"...). It is also reflected in the fact that men tend to slightly used less words when interrupting a woman (table 4, 6.01 words per sentence when interrupting a woman and 6.25 words when interrupting a man). This is the only we can report. Men do not seem to treat significantly differently men and women in general.

An interesting difference between how women speak is the fact that they tend to be more negative (higher average of no than for men). This assumption should be taken carefully because French people tend to be very ironic. "Yes" could only be ironic. In that case, it would mean that women are less ironic than men. From the list of most used words, women tend to confront with solid arguments the speaker. "Salaries" and "billion" are part of the most used words, which reflects deeper arguments. However, women tend to use less words when interrupting someone. In table 4, it can be seen that women use only 4.4 words per sentence which is quite low compared to men.

I pursue this analysis by presenting feature co-occurrence matrices. These network graphs are highly useful when it comes to displaying the relationships that words have among each other and



which properties these networks of words have. It helps us understanding the logic behind each interruption and have a broader picture of its message.

Plot 7 and plot 8 present the feature co-occurrence matrices for men. Men massively use shorter words which are more emotional than women. They refer often to the President of the Assembly (which is responsible to the smooth running of the debate). They probably use a lot of sarcasm because words around the President of the Assembly (*Madame* and *Présidente*) are only positive. The graph of men interrupting men is noticeably tightened as the three other graphs. It could mean that these interruptions are quite similar to each other.

As already highlighted, women seem to have deeper arguments. The matrices are larger than the ones of men, and words more complicated than just inquiries. They also seem to call on more frequently to the frame of the Assemblée Nationale ("droit", "demande", "suspension", "séance" "right", "ask", "suspension", "session"). Specifically when interrupting men, women attack with solid and constructed arguments. Specific words such as tax evasion (*fraude fiscale*) or salaries (*salaires*) come up. This could mean that women internalized critics such that they do not have a legitimate right to criticize if they do not master the subject and present constructed analysis even for short interruptions.

It is however difficult to find a noticeable difference between how MPs interrupt men and women. It is actually quite reassuring that women do not suffer from a particular treatment.

## 9 Conclusion

This study represents an initial exploration of MPs reaction towards other MPs in France. The aim is to assess whether MPs interrupt differently according to the gender of the MP. Specifically, I tried to determine whether interruptions in parliamentary debates can be considered a form of symbolic violence in parliamentary debates against women.

This does not seem to be the case in France in the Assemblée Nationale. On the contrary, women are significantly less interrupted than men. The interruptions are a bit shorter when addressed to a woman. It could mean that men are actually more wary to interrupt a woman and do not want

to be accused of maninterrupting. Secondly, it is difficult to find any difference in how MPs address themselves to women and men. As such, the hypothesis that women suffer from maninterrupting can be discarded for the context of the Assemblée Nationale. However, it seems that there are differences in how women and men interrupt. Women interrupt significantly less and with shorter sentences in average, but likely with more constructed arguments rather than only emotional sentences. This is interesting, because it means that women integrated gender stereotypes that they are more emotional than men and fight against them.

Nonetheless, this study is not without its flaws. First, it would have been really meaningful to introduce a time variable. However, some simple descriptive statistics stated that the average duration was almost equal between an interruption and an intervention, even though the average length of an interruption is only of a few words. It means that interruptions are often followed by crowd movements or silence or something which is not recorded into the text data. For the case of this homework study, I did not have the time to introduce a proper measure of time or to cast out outliers. Secondly, I chose to only rely on the debates of summer 2022 to not spend too much time on cleaning the files which contain some tiny errors (such as two times an ID for example) and on computation time. It would be quite simple to extend the study to any debate of the Assemblée Nationale. Thirdly, I originally wanted to also compute a sentiment analysis. However, I did not achieve this aim. From what I found, only one dictionary for sentiments exist in French which is called French Lexicoder Sentiment Analysis and provided by the Université Laval (Canada) under the website <https://www.poltext.org/fr/donnees-et-analyses/lexicoder>. However, this dictionary references only one positive word, which does not allow to compute a sentiment analysis.

## 10 Appendix

### 10.1 The French Assembly

#### 10.1.1 Number of seats by party

Party	Number of seats	Women seats
<b>Governing parties</b>	<b>250</b>	<b>102</b>
Renaissance (RE)	170	72
Groupe démocrate, MoDem et indépendants (DEM)	51	20
Groupe Horizons et apparentés (HOR)	29	10
<b>Opposition parties</b>	<b>318</b>	<b>114</b>
Rassemblement National (RN)	88	32
La France Insoumise (LFI) - NUPES	74	31
Les Républicains (LR)	61	18
Socialistes et apparentés (SOC) - NUPES	31	11
Ecologiste (ECO) - NUPES	22	13
Gauche démocrate et républicaine (GDR) - NUPES	22	4
Libertés, Indépendants, Outre-mer et Territoires (LIOT)	20	3
Non apparentés	5	2
Vacant	4	

Note : The left parties formed a coalition in the 2022 election called Nouvelle Union populaire écologique et sociale (NUPES).

Traduction : "Non apparentés" : do not belong to any party

Table 1: Composition of the 16th legislature of the French Fifth Republic

## 10.2 Descriptive statistics

	Female	Male
Interruption	18	82
Generic discourse	32	68

Table 2: Interruption by gender (in percentage by row)

	Person speaking		In percentage		by row
	Female	Male	Female	Male	
Female interrupting	220	544	28.7	61.3	
Male interrupting	559	3024	15.6	84.4	

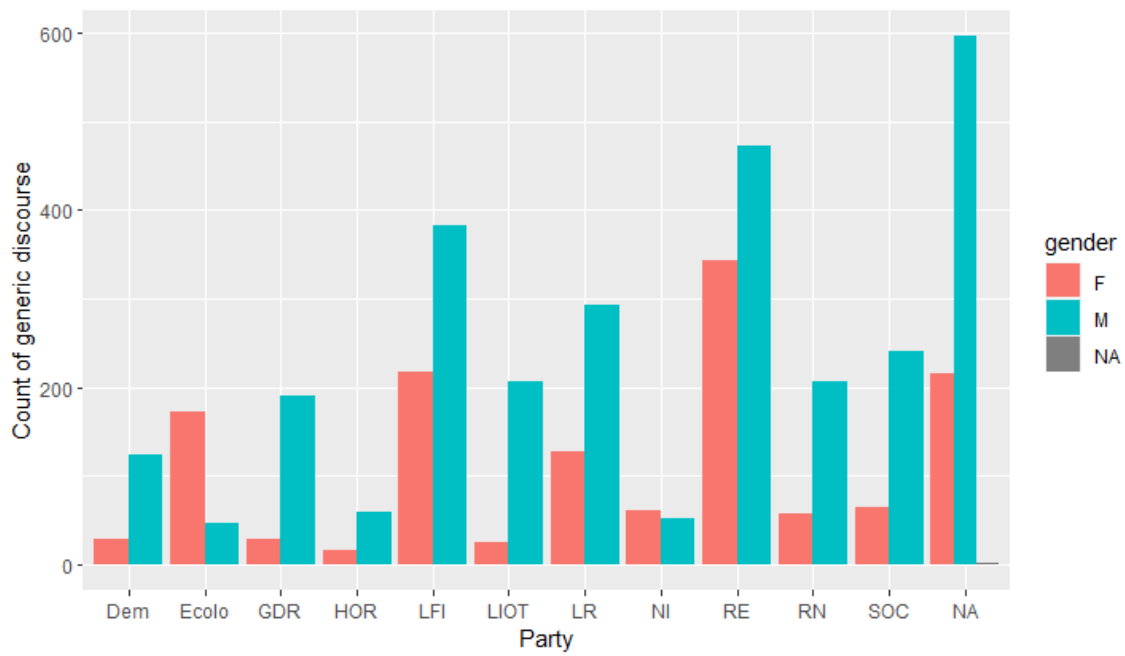
Table 3: Interruption Dyads

### 10.2.1 Plots

## 10.3 Word used to interrupt

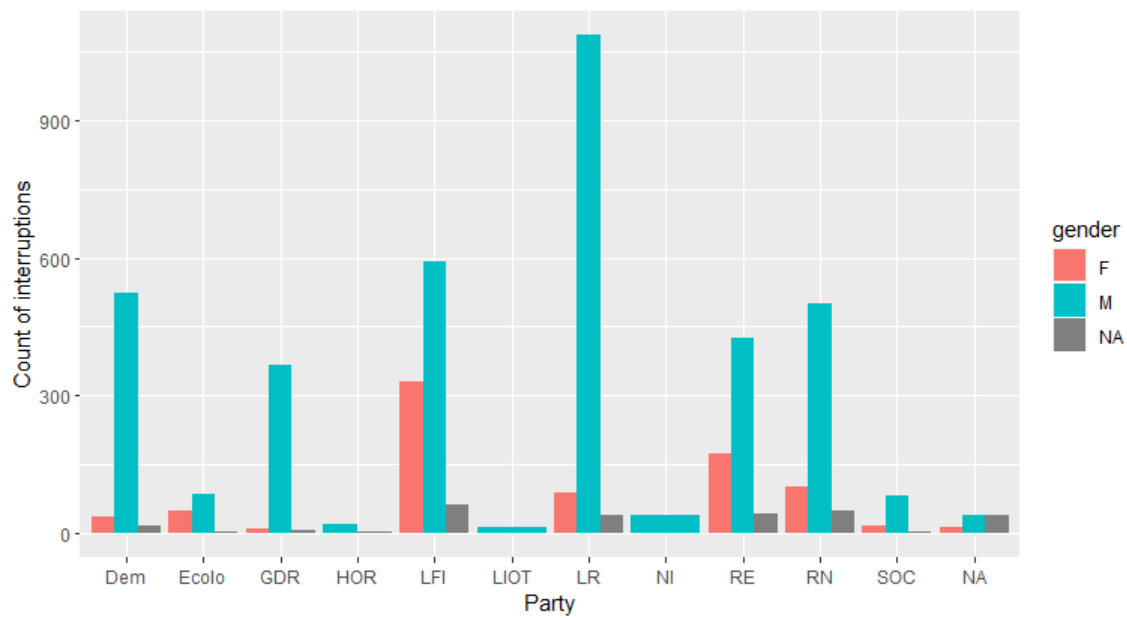
	Person speaking	
	Woman	Man
Woman interrupting	4.43	4.39
Man interrupting	6.01	6.25

Table 4: Number of words used to interrupt



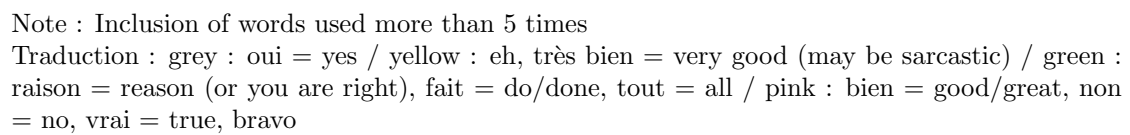
Note : NA refers to members of governments (ministers) or guests

Figure 1: Count of generic speeches delivered by gender and by party

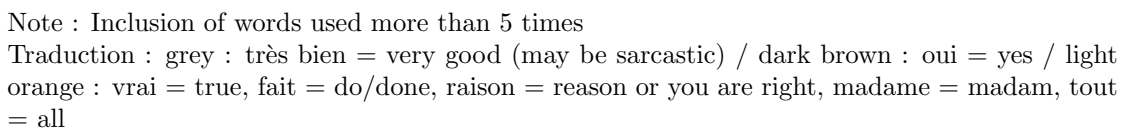


Note : in certain cases (e.g. interruption too fast), the interrupting person or his gender or party was not identified and are referred as NA

Figure 2: Count of interruption by party and by gender



15



16







Note : Inclusion of words used more than 5 times

Traduction : grey : non = no, madame = madam / dark brown : oui = yes / yellow : présidente = president (for women) / pink : ans = years, fait = do/done, faux = false, eh, tout = all, alors = so/then, bien = good, demande = ask

Figure 6: Wordcloud of female interruption to female counterparts

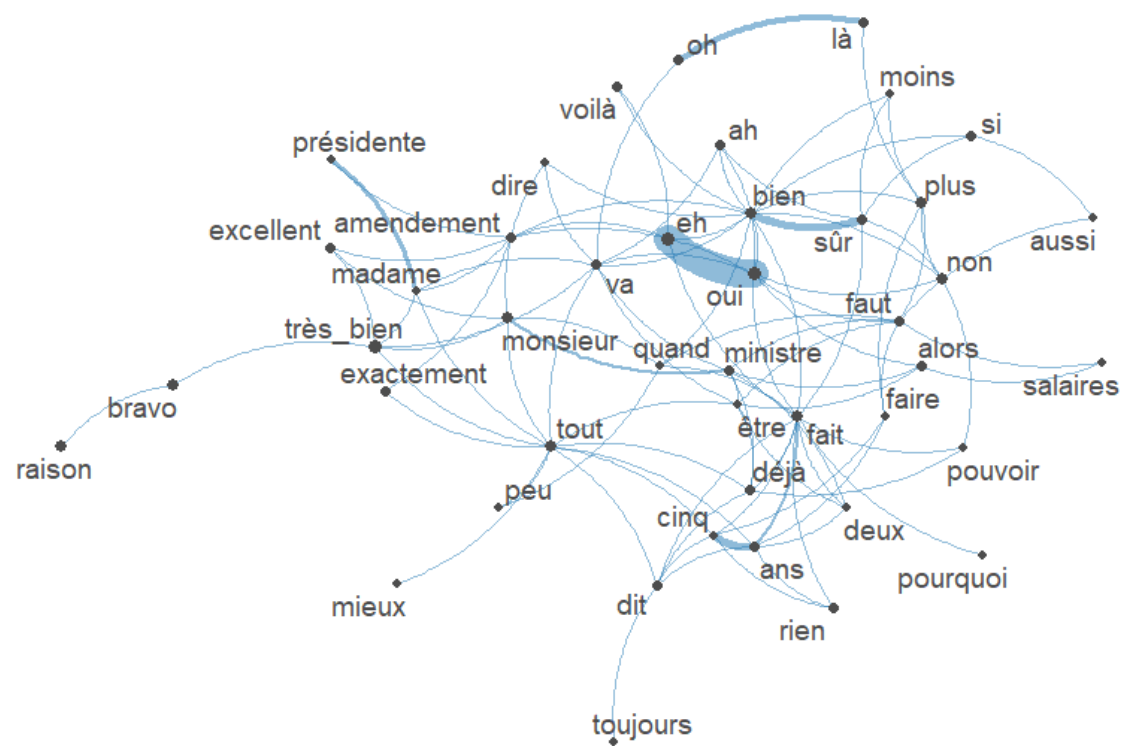


Figure 7: Feature co-occurrence matrix - Men interrupting men

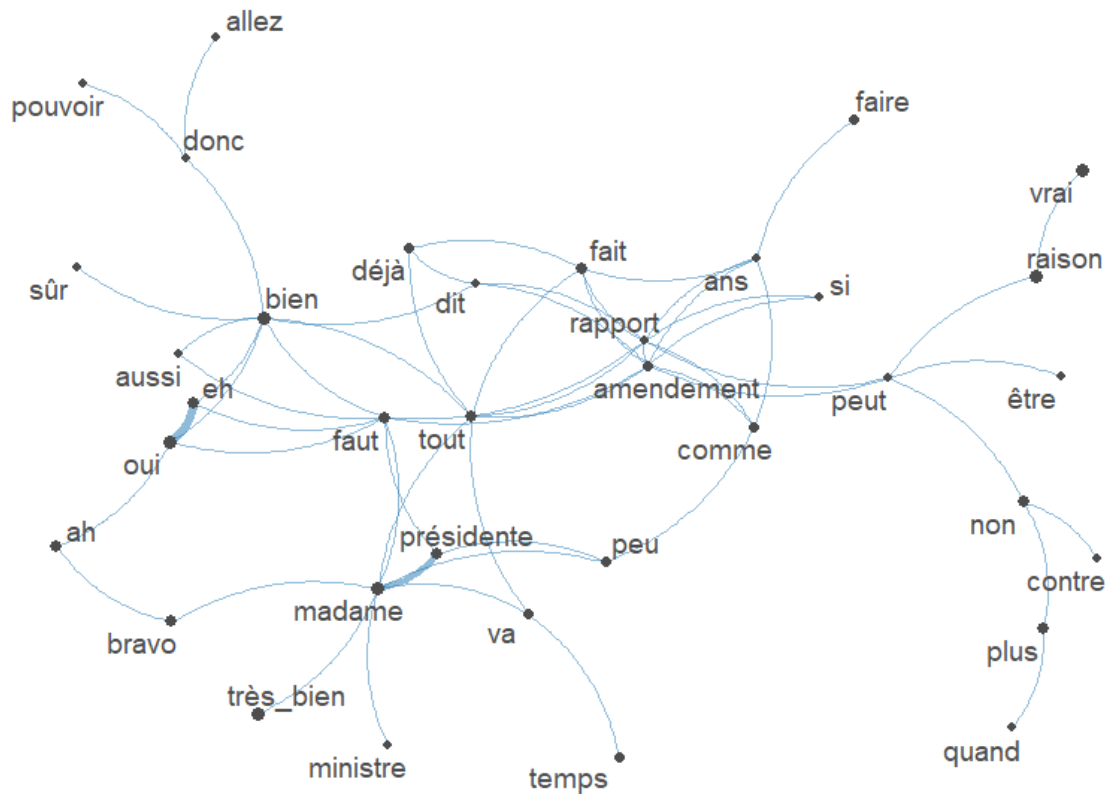


Figure 8: Feature co-occurrence matrix - Men interrupting women

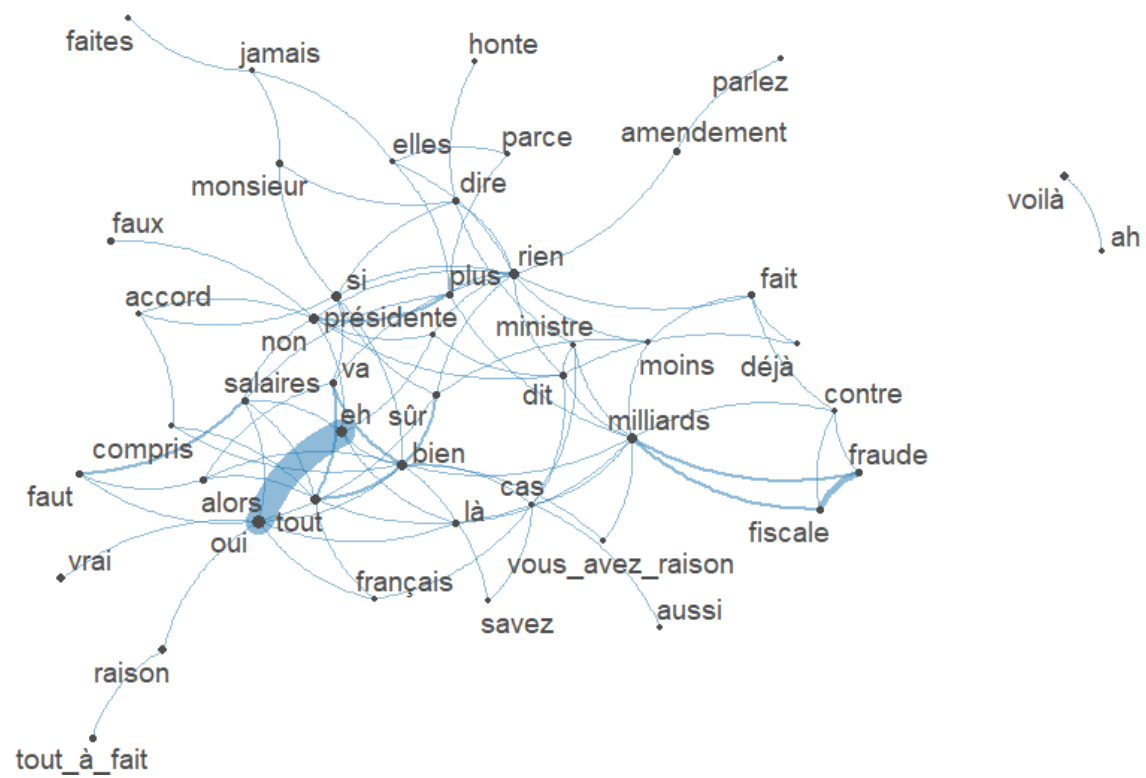


Figure 9: Feature co-occurrence matrix - Women interrupting men

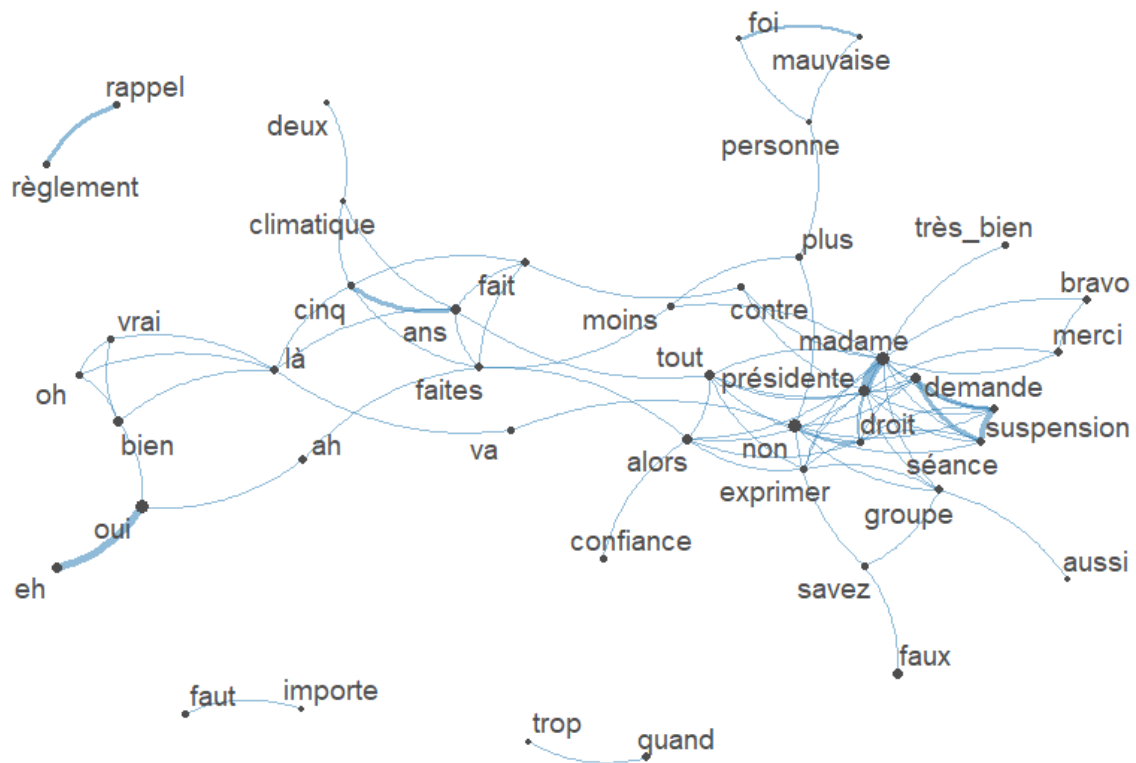


Figure 10: Feature co-occurrence matrix - Women interrupting women

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