

Guidelines for inclusive language: who is to be included?

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Abstract

This article examines the development and characteristics of guidelines for non-sexist/inclusive language, a genre of texts that has evolved since the 1970s to promote gender equality in language use. These guidelines, which vary in format and scope, aim to address the representation of individuals in language and advocate for gender balance through practical recommendations. The article defines these guidelines and explores typical elements found in them. It also discusses the variance in content and format among guidelines, which can range from brief recommendations to comprehensive books and may address one or multiple languages.

The concept of inclusion in such guidelines has expanded beyond gender to encompass various groups of people, aspects of communication, and broader contexts. The article traces the development of the term “inclusive” in guidelines and discusses how different guidelines define and approach inclusivity. It concludes by emphasizing the evolving role of these guidelines in adapting to changing social, political, and linguistic contexts, and their potential to address multiple dimensions of inclusion in the future.

1 Introduction

The debate surrounding gender and language has been extensively explored in various specialised fields, including linguistics, feminist studies, and language policy. Alongside theoretical and engaged programmatic works advocating for gender-inclusive language, guidelines have played a pivotal role in disseminating these ideas for broader practical application.

This article examines the genre of texts collectively referred to as guidelines (or guides) for non-sexist/inclusive language¹, which encompasses a wide range of titles and formats. The second section defines and describes these guidelines, highlighting both their shared characteristics and differing approaches. The third section introduces a multilingual collection of guidelines, which forms the foundation for the subsequent parts. The fourth section explores the elements typically addressed in guides concerned with “inclusive” language, with a particular focus on French-language guidelines, where recent developments demonstrate a growing thematic scope. This section also investigates the diverse issues encompassed by the notion of language

¹ I have chosen the attributes non-sexist and inclusive to describe the guides discussed in this article, although a whole range of other characterisations would also be available. In English-language guidelines, other attributes include bias-free, equitable, gender-sensitive, gender-inclusive, gender-neutral, gender-fair or non-discriminatory (cf. Pfalzgraf 2025) for a detailed discussion in various languages.

and inclusion across different languages. It demonstrates that inclusion operates at multiple levels, most of which extend beyond grammatical gender.

2 Guidelines for non-sexist/inclusive language

Within the discourse on gender-neutral language, various types of texts play significant roles, ranging from descriptive analyses to politically prescriptive documents. This article focuses on a specific genre of texts, which I refer to, using a general umbrella term, as *guidelines for non-sexist/inclusive language*. These guidelines, published since the 1970s, are defined by the following criteria:

1. They are published documents.
2. They address the representation of persons in (written) language, either exclusively or in addition to other subjects.
3. They include a (more or less strong) call to action, specifically advocating for gender balance in language use.
4. They describe the means to be used, typically providing a list of recommended, prescribed, or to-be-avoided methods or resources.

(modified after Elmiger 2024: 15)

The following elaborates on this definition and outlines the typical elements found within such guidelines.

1. A published document does not necessarily imply public availability. Some guidelines are intended for internal use within specific institutions, such as public administrations, universities, or corporations, and are thus not accessible to the general public. While earlier guidelines were predominantly printed, recent ones are often published electronically, typically as PDFs or web pages.
2. The representation of human individuals in language² is central to this definition. However, this topic may constitute one of several addressed in broader guidelines, such as editorial style guides, academic writing manuals, or documents promoting other forms of inclusion (see section 4). Notably, documents primarily focused on legal or social issues (e. g., gender equality or transgender rights) or those consisting solely of glossaries are excluded unless they explicitly address grammatical gender.
3. The call to action may either be explicit or remain implicit. Its enforceability varies depending on the context; however, guidelines generally encourage rather than mandate specific language practices.³

² Linguistic forms of gender representation are not always the only aspects addressed; graphic forms such as images, illustrations, pictograms and signage, can also be covered in the guidelines (see section 4.2).

³ Cf. Siegenthaler (2024) regarding French and German guidelines. We have shown (cf. Elmiger/Tunger/Schaeffer-Lacroix 2017) that even in contexts where the use of non-sexist language is legally regulated, only a small percentage of texts have been checked for consistency.

4. Unlike texts that merely describe non-sexist or inclusive language, guidelines actively promote the use of non-sexist/gender-inclusive forms. Consequently, purely directive documents that merely demand implementation without demonstrating how the goal should be achieved – that is, those lacking practical recommendations – are not considered guidelines in the strict sense.

2.1 Typical elements

Regarding content and structure, guidelines for non-sexist/inclusive language demonstrate considerable variation. Nonetheless, most share several common elements. Typically, they begin with an introduction that outlines the rationale for advocating specific language practices or changes. Certain documents also incorporate legal considerations relevant to their particular context. The central section of these guidelines is usually devoted to the linguistic forms or techniques that are recommended or discouraged, often accompanied by examples illustrating preferred solutions. Other recurring elements include contextual information (e. g., the historical or institutional background of the document), argumentative sections (supporting language change or addressing potential objections), word lists (particularly in languages where the formation of gendered personal nouns varies), model texts, and bibliographical references.

The strategies promoted (or discouraged) in these guidelines are frequently grouped into broader metastrategies. This discussion will focus exclusively on strategies aimed at avoiding generically intended masculine forms, such as masculine person nouns in languages with grammatical gender (for example in French *étudiants* [‘students’ (masc.)] when referring to students of any gender) or masculine pronouns in English (*he/his*). Furthermore, other topics are often addressed in guidelines, including linguistic stereotypes, the morphological and lexical aspects of forming feminine personal nouns⁴, or terms of address (e. g., *Mrs.* vs. *Miss*).

One of the earliest and most common strategies for promoting gender inclusivity in language is **visibility**. This approach explicitly includes feminine forms alongside masculine ones. This can involve using full double forms for pronouns, such as in English⁵ *he and she* or in French *toutes et tous* [‘all (fem.) and all (masc.)’ and personal nouns such as *étudiantes et étudiants* [‘students (fem.) and students (masc.)’]), or abbreviated forms (e. g., *étudiant·e·s*), which are sometimes interpreted as having a non-binary meaning as well. While double forms are the most explicit in symbolising the presence of women in language, they have faced criticism in recent years for reinforcing a binary view of gender. Consequently, more recent guidelines are prioritising neographies that incorporate symbols – such as colons, asterisks or underscores in German: *Student:innen*, *Student*innen*, *Student_innen* – to be more inclusive of non-binary individuals.

Neutralisation is another commonly recommended strategy, involving the use of word forms that avoid grammatical gender distinctions. For example, in German, this includes substantivised adjectives and participles (e. g., *die Reichen* [‘the rich’], *die Studierenden* [‘the studying’

⁴ In certain contexts, guidelines have addressed these lexical questions, e. g. in France (cf. Becquer et al. 1999) prior to tackling the issues of (generic or specific) use of masculine forms in context (cf. Haut Conseil à l’Égalité entre les femmes et les hommes HCE 2015).

⁵ In English, pronouns show gender variation, unlike most personal nouns (cf. Gygax et al. 2019).

(= ‘students’), *die Allierten* [‘the allied’]) or epicene forms⁶ that can refer to individuals of any gender (e. g., French *élève* [‘pupil’], *bibliothécaire* [‘librarian’] or *personne* [‘person’], *individu* [‘individual’]). Neutralisation can also involve the use of collective nouns (e. g., *the population* or *the team*).

A final general strategy is the avoidance of gendered forms altogether, achieved through techniques such as reformulating sentences in the passive voice or addressing individuals directly rather than referring to them in the third person.

While these are the most frequently promoted metastrategies, some guidelines advocate less common approaches. For example, these include the generic use of feminine forms (instead of masculine ones) or the inclusion of footnotes to clarify the intended meaning of generically used masculine forms.

2.2 Variance

Guidelines for non-sexist/inclusive language are far from homogeneous, both in terms of content and format. They vary significantly in format, ranging from single-page recommendations to comprehensive books covering a wide range of topics. These documents may address one language or multiple languages, particularly in bilingual regions or institutions, such as universities that operate in both a local language and English. Additional factors contributing to their diversity include their scope (targeting small groups or entire nations) and the degree of commitment they demand (from mere recommendations to legally binding obligations).

The genre of guidelines for non-sexist or inclusive language lacks clear-cut boundaries. Describing this textual genre is more feasible in terms of prototypicality rather than rigid Aristotelian categories. Moreover, it is important to recognise that the perspective adopted here, which focuses on the representation of individuals in language – is not the sole relevant one. While this aspect is central to my analysis, it may be less important in other contexts or from other perspectives. For example, in legal editing or typography guides, it might be secondary. Similarly, some guides may approach linguistic forms from alternative perspectives, such as addressing discrimination or political issues related to equality.

2.3 Previous studies

Guidelines for non-sexist or inclusive language have been the subject of various studies (cf. e. g., Nilsen 1987; Schlichting 1997; Christen 2004 for earlier works; Elmiger 2021a and 2022 for general descriptions, with the former focusing on Romance languages). Recent publications have explored diverse characteristics of this genre. For instance, Wetschanow (2017) has highlighted the evolving positions driving the development of guidelines over time. This research considers legal and institutional factors, as well as shifting (queer-)feminist perspectives on

⁶ In French terminology, the use of *épïcène* differs from other languages. It denotes mostly invariable forms that are used both with feminine and masculine satellite forms, (e. g. determiners, adjectives, pronouns, etc.) that agree in gender with the noun they modify or refer to (e. g. *la nouvelle bibliothécaire* vs. *le nouveau bibliothécaire*), while in other traditions, *epicene* words have one grammatical gender but refer to any gender (e. g. *a person*) (cf. Elmiger 2023).

language. Schneider (2022) examines the tension between the use of indexical signs (e. g., asterisks, hyphens and underscores) and grammatical constraints in German institutional guides.

In her doctoral thesis, Siegenthaler (2024) analysed 403 German and French guidelines issued by administrative or academic sources. Her research focuses on the binding nature of these guidelines for their intended audiences and the specific strategies they recommend (or mandate) or reject. Cassaris (2025) has also studied guidelines in (Swiss) academic settings, with particular consideration of how non-binary persons are (or should be) included in them.

3 A Collection of guidelines

Over the past 50 years, guidelines for non-sexist/inclusive language have emerged in a wide range of contexts. To facilitate research, I have compiled a collection of current and historical documents, including some that have been replaced by newer versions or originate from defunct institutions. As of early February 2025, the database contains 3 310 guidelines in over 40 languages, including reissued earlier versions. Table 1 illustrates the distribution of these guidelines across different language families.

Romance languages	Germanic languages	Slavonic languages	Other Indo-European languages	Other languages
Asturian (1)	Afrikaans (1)	Bosnian (1)	Breton (1)	Arab (4)
Catalan (129)	Danish (2)	Bulgarian (2)	Greek (4)	Basque (18)
French (461)	English (384)	Croatian (4)	Irish Gaelic (2)	Chinese (2)
Galician (28)	Dutch (12)	Czech (19)	Latvian (2)	Estonian (2)
Gallo (1)	German (1268)	Russian (3)	Lithuanian (2)	Finnish (2)
Italian (155)	Norwegian (1)	Serbian (1)		Hungarian (2)
Portuguese (75)	Swedish (2)	Slovak (3)		Maltese (2)
Rhaeto-Romance (8)		Slovene (2)		Turkish (3)
Romanian (3)		Polish (14)		various African languages (8)
Spanish (798)				
Valencian (50)				

Table 1: Languages covered by the documents included in the Collection of non-sexist/inclusive language (February 2025). (Note: As some guidelines cover multiple languages, the total number of languages is greater than the number of documents.)

The publicly accessible database provides the following information for each guideline (cf. Elmiger (2024):⁷

⁷ The original documents are not available via the database; however, the newer versions can in most cases be found through an internet search. Individual items can be requested from the author of this contribution.

- bibliographical reference
- language(s) of the guide
- language(s) addressed
- country/countries, region(s) and city/cities covered
- context of origin (politics, authorities, law; international institutions; churches and religious organisations; associations, companies, etc.; universities, schools; journalism; publishers; linguistic professionals; private individuals (more than one category may apply)).

Due to the large number of guidelines and limited proficiency in many of the languages covered, specific content (e. g., preferred strategies) is not described in the collection. For detailed analyses, cf. Siegenthaler (2024) on French and German guidelines.

4 Types of inclusion

The term *inclusive* has become one of the most frequently used attributes in the titles of guidelines. Of the 1 558 guides published after 2019, 700 (45%) include a variant of *inclusive* (e. g., *inclusion*, *gender-inclusive*, *inclusively*) in their titles.⁸ In English-language guides, *inclusive language* has been the predominant term since the early 1980s (cf. e. g., Metropolitan Community Churches 1981; The United Church of Canada 1981). The following discussion traces the development of the attribute *inclusive* in French-language guidelines, primarily from the northern Francophonie (European French-speaking countries and regions) and Canada (particularly Québec).

In French guidelines, *inclusive* was rarely used before the 2010s. Early occurrences appear in theological contexts, such as a bilingual guide by a Swiss humanitarian organisation (cf. Hilfswerk der Evangelischen Kirchen der Schweiz, Entraide Protestante Suisse HEKS/EPER 1999), titled *Principes pour l'utilisation du langage inclusif à l'EPER* ['Principles for the Use of Inclusive Language at EPER']. Another example is also related to a bilingual religious context (cf. L'Église Unie du Canada 1999), which promotes "langage inclusive". These examples suggest that theological contexts were among the first to advocate for gender-inclusive language and to label guidelines as *inclusive*⁹.

In recent years, *inclusive* has gained prominence in French-speaking contexts, particularly over the past decade (cf. Elmiger 2021b). While the use (or avoidance) of generically intended masculine forms has been debated since the 1980s in peripheral Francophone regions of the North, it sparked limited social and political discourse in France, the traditional centre of the Francophonie. The first major public guide proposing alternative forms was published in 2015 (cf. Haut Conseil à l'Égalité entre les femmes et les hommes (HCE) 2015). Subsequently, an influential guide, issued by a communications agency (cf. Haddad 2016), introduced the term *écriture inclusive*, which significantly impacted France and the broader Francophone sphere. The term gained widespread attention during a major public debate in 2017, marking the first time the topic reached the forefront of public discourse in France. Previously used terms such as

⁸ In some languages, more than one variant of this attribute is in use, e. g. in Spanish, *inclusivo* is used as well as *incluyente*. It is unclear if this denotes differences in content or is rather a stylistic variance.

⁹ Cf. Abbou (2023) for the genealogy of the term in the Francophone as well as the Anglophone tradition.

(langue/communication) *épicène, non sexiste, non discriminatoire*, etc. are still in use, but are now overshadowed by *écriture inclusive* (cf. Elmiger 2021a).

However, this shift in terminology has not led to a standardisation of content or definitions. Consequently, terms such as *écriture inclusive, langue inclusive, or français inclusif* may refer to different elements, depending on the guideline.

4.1 Inclusion of different genders through gendered word forms

The seminal guide by Haddad (ed.) (2016) defines *écriture inclusive* as “l’ensemble des attentions graphiques et syntaxiques qui permettent d’assurer une égalité de représentations des deux sexes” (Haddad (ed.) (2016: 4)).¹⁰ This definition reflects a traditional binary view of gender. In contrast, other guides adopt a broader approach. For example, the Canadian guide by Les 3 sex* et Club Sexu (2021: 4) defines *écriture inclusive* as follows:

le concept d’écriture inclusive (ou rédaction, écriture, communication, formulation) est la grande catégorie qui se subdivise en trois différents types : écriture épicène, féminisation et écriture non binaire [...].¹¹

Alpheratz’s (2018) *Grammaire du français inclusif* challenges the binary grammatical gender system by introducing a third grammatical gender and new formal paradigms. In this work, *inclusive French* is defined as

l’ensemble des variations langagières fondées sur la notion de genre, en particulier sur le rejet d’une hiérarchie entre les représentations sociales ou symboliques qui sont associées aux genres grammaticaux, ces variations ayant pour objectif d’inclure et de visibiliser tous les genres dans la langue comme dans la pensée.¹²

(Alpheratz 2018: 50)

These three definitions illustrate the evolution of French guidelines from a traditional feminist focus on the visibility of women to a more contemporary queer-feminist perspective that includes non-binary and other gender identities. However, this shift is not universal and appears primarily in more progressive guidelines. Similar trends can be observed in other languages, as shown by Siegenthaler (2024) for French and German.

Inclusiveness can not only relate to gendered word forms – that is, words that refer to persons of different genders, which often contain formal marks in personal nouns and related gendered categories. The following sections provide examples from guides in a variety of languages. While they show the types of inclusion that can be observed, it is not possible to determine whether they represent general tendencies across all contexts and languages.

¹⁰ ‘all the graphic and syntactic details that ensure equal representation of the two sexes’.

¹¹ ‘the concept of inclusive writing (or drafting, writing, communication, formulation) is the broad category that is subdivided into three different types: epicene writing, feminisation and non-binary writing [...]’.

¹² ‘the set of linguistic variations based on the notion of gender, in particular on the rejection of a hierarchy between the social or symbolic representations associated with grammatical genders, the aim of these variations being to include and make visible all genders in language as well as in thought.’

4.2 Inclusion of different groups of people

Many guidelines expand inclusion past gender-inclusion, through the avoidance of generically intended masculine forms. A first circle of expansion can be seen in guides that suggest considering previously unrepresented or underrepresented groups of people. This often implies the use of gendered word forms, primarily addressing more or less specific groups for consideration and naming. Examples include:

- people of diverse gender identities and sexual orientations (cf. e. g., Federación Estatal de Lesbianas, Gais, Transexuales y Bisexuales FELGTB/FSC-CCOO 2019)
- people of different ages (considering, depending on the context, especially younger and/or older people) (cf. e. g. Plataforma de Infancia 2024)
- people of diverse ethnic, geographical or religious backgrounds (cf. e. g., Instituto Electoral y de Participación Ciudadana de Yucatán IEPAC 2019)
- people with disabilities (cf. e. g., Generalitat de Catalunya 2021)
- people living in various economic conditions (cf. e. g. Programa de las Naciones Unidas para el Desarrollo PNUD – Cuba 2014)

While some are focused on specific groups, as in the examples given, others are highly comprehensive, such as the following guideline, that includes no less than 15 “Issue areas”: Age, Disability, Economy, Environment/Science, Food, Gender/Sex, Geopolitics, Health, Housing/Space, Immigration/Refugees, Indigeneity/Ancestry, Police/Incarceration, Race/Ethnicity, Sexual and Domestic Violence (cf. Sum Of Us 2016: 3).

Other elements appear only sporadically. For example, a Mexican guide (cf. Ciudad de México 2016) lists no fewer than forty categories, including people with different languages or ways of speaking, people with different appearances or clothing, people with tattoos or piercings, or those with a criminal record.

This Spanish language guide is particularly thorough in showing how certain social groups can (or should) be mentioned in language. Compared with this and other languages with grammatical gender, English guidelines tend to address these groups earlier and more consistently. This may be due to several reasons. On the one hand, the genre of guidelines for non-sexist/inclusive language has a longer tradition in English compared to other languages, which allows for a longer period of discussion and revision of their content. In English-speaking countries, inclusive policies (such as, for example, Diversity, Equity and Inclusion programmes) have also arisen earlier than in other contexts. On the other hand, the question of grammatical gender marks is less prevalent in English than in other languages (apart from personal and possessive pronouns, only few personal nouns differ between masculine and feminine forms), whereas in other languages, gender-inclusiveness affects comparatively far more forms. Therefore, English guidelines can give more attention to including previously less-considered groups rather than addressing questions about the avoidance of generically intended masculine forms.

4.3 Inclusion in communication

While the previous section has dealt with gendered forms and more or less specific groups in texts, guidelines can consider other aspects of communication beyond the inclusion of these groups.

Examples of aspects commonly addressed in guidelines include:

- **non-verbal forms of communication:** many guidelines recommend that images or illustrations depicting human beings should include people of different genders, origins, and ages
- **accessible information:** texts should be both barrier-free (e. g. accessible to readers with visual impairment) and easy to understand (e. g. for cognitively impaired people or language learners)
- **respectful and non-violent communication:** considering that some social groups have unequal access to communication and may be hierarchically marginalised, guidelines advise on providing accessibility for everyone and ensuring that communication is as low-threshold and respectful as possible.
- **context-specific communication:** some guidelines offer advice on improving inclusion in certain communicative contexts, such as teaching.

This list is also not complete, as all aspects of communication can potentially be evaluated with regard to inclusiveness. Less commonly addressed elements include those in a guide from Ontario (Canada) that deals with various features of language use (cf. Durham District School Board 2011):

- tone of voice
- non-verbal inclusive language
- pronunciation of names.

4.4 Inclusion in broader contexts

The topic of language and inclusion is treated in an even broader sense when it comes to the contexts in which it may play an important role. This involves very different thematic, institutional and communicative settings, which can only be listed here as examples. These contexts include:

- the organisation of events (cf. Amnesty International Australia 2023)
- the recruitment of staff (cf. Conseil de la langue française et de la politique linguistique 2019)
- specific contexts such as museums (cf. Fondazione Musei Civici di Venezia 2024) or sports (cf. Égale Action 2024).

In such general contexts, language and the various types of inclusion are sometimes just one aspect among others. Consequently, their content can be quite similar to guidelines (and other texts) that address inclusiveness in contexts without recommendations related to gendered word forms – and are thus excluded from the collection.

The various types of inclusion discussed above can be summarised as follows. The inclusion of gendered word forms (to refer to all social gender categories) is central to guidelines for non-sexist/inclusive language. These guides may also include other types of inclusion: groups of people (for which gendered word forms apply in languages with grammatical gender), aspects of communication (that can apply to those groups), as well as contexts in which communication is carried out.

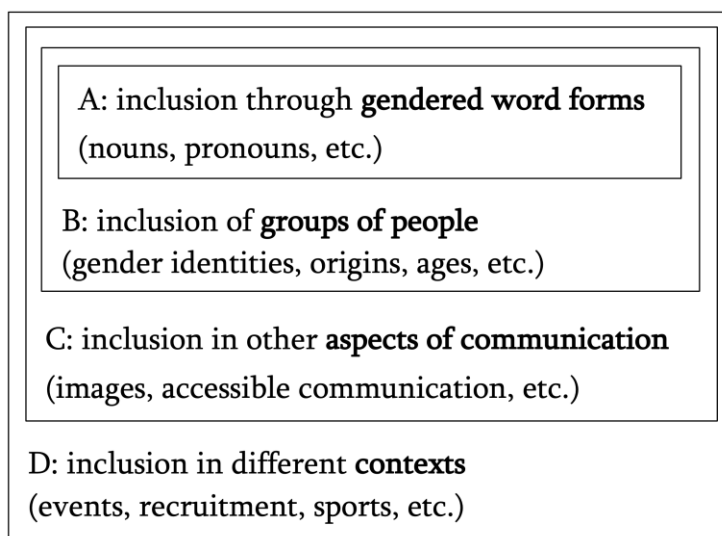


Figure 1: Various types of inclusion treated in guidelines for non-sexist/inclusive language. Individual guides must pertain to A and may include one or several other elements (B, C, D).

5 Conclusion

Guidelines for non-sexist/inclusive language have existed for over four decades and have developed in a surprisingly wide range of ways, reflecting broader societal shifts in understanding gender, representation, and inclusion. They aim to provide guidance for different publics, publications and contexts, promoting language use that better represents people of different genders. Initially focused on addressing the visibility of women in language, some of these guidelines have expanded to encompass a wider range of gender identities, including non-binary individuals. This progression highlights the dynamic nature of the genre, which continues to adapt to changing social, political, and linguistic contexts.

While this aspect of inclusion is central in many guides, as demonstrated by various examples, guidelines often extend beyond gendered word forms: they may also address other forms of inclusion, such as diverse groups of people, variable facets of communication or different contexts.

Looking ahead, the role of guidelines for non-sexist/inclusive language will likely continue to evolve. While the use of gendered word forms is likely to remain a central point in languages like French, future guidelines may place greater emphasis on multiple dimensions of inclusion, such as origin, disability, and socioeconomic status, alongside grammatical gender. It remains to be seen whether such broader aspects will be given more consideration in future guidelines and how political and social developments will influence the evolution of this genre.

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