

UMEÅ UNIVERSITY

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‘WE ARE AT WAR!’:
THE ROLE OF EMMANUEL MACRON’S
SPEECHES IN BUILDING A MEANING FOR
“COVID-19”

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Abstract:

Through discourse analysis, this thesis explores the way in which speeches delivered by the French President, Emmanuel Macron, during the health crisis of COVID-19 are creating a meaning for the floating signifier “COVID-19”. The methodological approach highlights how the discourse used is intrinsically gendered, both grammatically and conceptually, during the construction of meaning. The focus of this analysis is the extended metaphor of war and its relationship to the concept of Nation in the way they build a field of discursivity for “COVID-19”. These concepts are ambiguous when it comes to gender, questioning the way discourse and grammar build meaning.

Keywords: COVID-19, Discourse, Gender, Nation, War

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INTRODUCTION

In March 2020, countries around Europe decided to declare national lockdowns following the rise of the number of coronavirus cases. COVID-19 was declared to be a pandemic just a few weeks beforehand and other countries, such as China, had already started taking measures such as quarantine and lockdown. At the time of this thesis, in May 2021, the pandemic is still ongoing throughout the world with varied situations in each country. This period of pandemic has led to a situation where country leaders have had to address their nation regularly in order to provide updates on the situation and to communicate new rules. Most of the time, these speeches were delivered by the highest ranked country leader however sometimes these speeches were also delivered by other people from the government, giving them less resonance. These speeches were written in order to communicate clearly to the population but also with several ulterior motives, from wanting the population to understand the gravity of the situation to wanting them to think that the government has always been taking the right path. Hennekam and Shymko explain that in times of crisis it sometimes appears necessary to rely on the status quo in order to make sense of the situation, which ‘in a minimal organization like a household, responses to a crisis like COVID-19 may translate into ‘doing gender’, which has already appeared in the behavioural patterns of political leaders reacting to the global pandemic’ (Hennekam & Shymko 2020). Therefore, the language used in these speeches is of utmost importance. Language shows how the leaders have been approaching the crisis and how they choose to address the people, to talk about the country and about the virus. That is why language is a fundamental part of the way out of this crisis.

This thesis will thus study the way the language is used in the speeches delivered by Emmanuel Macron throughout the crisis and how the meaning of COVID-19 is constructed. I will use Laclau and Mouffe’s Discourse Analysis method in order to understand the way in which the meaning of “COVID-19” is elaborated and how the discourse surrounding this concept has been constructing meanings. The focus of the analysis will be on the gendered ambiguity that might be created around this new concept and how it is expressed in these speeches. France will be the subject of study, which will consist of two parts. First, I will analyse two speeches delivered by the French president one year apart¹. The first one was delivered on March 16, 2020, when announcing the start of the first lockdown and the second was delivered

¹ The full transcriptions of the speeches in French can be found online: <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2020/03/16/adresse-aux-francais-covid19> and <https://www.elysee.fr/emmanuel-macron/2021/03/31/adresse-aux-francais-31-mars-2021>

on March 31, 2021, when announcing a different kind of lockdown and the closure of schools for the month of April. These speeches will not necessarily be compared, but rather put together in order to understand the way the speeches throughout the pandemic have had to build meaning around a new concept and introduce new gender dynamics as it is usual to do with any new concept in a gendered language. Indeed, in a gendered language, each word is attributed a grammatical gender, in French it can be either feminine or masculine. It is generally decided by the Académie Française which has the authority over the use of the French language. In order to decide, usage, translation, phonetic and lexical fields are considered. Gender dynamics are thus introduced through this choice as linguistic relativity studies, such as the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, show that the way words are gendered shape the way they are perceived by the speakers (Haertlé 2017: 386). Moreover, the concept of Nation is as present as the one of COVID-19 throughout the country leader's speeches, an old concept that will be studied in relation to this new one, as well as in relation to its construction of gender. Their relationship dynamic might highlight the way gender is present throughout the speeches. Secondly, when speaking about the COVID-19 crisis in France and gendered discourse, it is then essential to mention the fact that "COVID-19" has been given a feminine gender in 2020, that is, the correct way to refer to COVID-19, officially, is by using "la" and not "le". Therefore, I will discuss how the gender ambiguity introduced in these speeches is related to the still floating meaning of "COVID-19" and the well-established albeit always redefined in each context meaning of "nation".

AIM AND QUESTIONS

The aim of this thesis is to show the ways in which meaning is built through discourse as well as how the building of meaning implies the use of gendered structures in language as well as in ideology. Here, I will focus on the discourse used in Emmanuel Macron's speeches during the crisis of COVID-19, analysing how the speaker creates a meaning for this new concept. I will also aim to show how discourse might be gendered in a period of crisis in order to generate reactions and play with well-known stereotypes so that the listeners understand the ideas that are conveyed.

I will ask, in the context of France: *How is the meaning of "COVID-19" built throughout the French president's speeches?* and *In what ways is Macron using gendered discourse when conveying information and instructions during the coronavirus health crisis?* In other words, I

will attempt to find out what meaning has been given by Macron to “COVID-19” through his speeches in order to deal with the crisis efficiently and communicate his ideas. Moreover, I will study to what extent the creation of a new meaning has relied on gendered values, discourse, and language.

METHODOLOGY

In order to collect data from the speeches for my analysis, I have watched and listened to both speeches and took notes. I was able to pause the speeches when needed or to go back in order to write down each interesting point I heard. I took notes of most of the speeches, excluding facts and rules that did not contain any relevant discourse. Both speeches being around 30-minute long, I was able to refer to the transcriptions and my notes when needed, having watched the speeches already to get an idea of the way they were delivered.

Discourse analysis

In order to analyse the speeches delivered by Emmanuel Macron, I will use Laclau and Mouffe’s Discourse Theory as it is explained in *Discourse analysis as theory and method* (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002), therefore also using their own theory in a way. This method will help understand the way in which the meaning of a new concept has built its space into the world and into language, and how it has been related to gender in a language that is strongly gendered as French is. Indeed, ‘the aim of discourse analysis is to map out the processes in which we struggle about the way in which the meaning of signs is to be fixed, and the processes by which some fixations of meaning become so conventionalised that we think of them as natural’ (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 25-26). To achieve this aim, Laclau and Mouffe’s method allows me to define a nodal point within the discourse I am analysing in order to understand the relationship it has with other signs.

A “nodal point” is defined as ‘a privileged sign around which the other signs are ordered; the other signs acquire their meaning from their relationship to the nodal point’ (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 26). In this context, the nodal point is “COVID-19”, a new sign that has been introduced in society widely only during the last year, around which all the other signs participate in acquiring a new meaning when being related to this particular nodal point. In other words, the nodal point acts as a reference when it comes to polysemy and figures of speech to enable the audience of the text to understand the meaning the signs have been given by the

author. As a matter of fact, ‘a discourse is a reduction of possibilities’ and ‘an attempt to stop the sliding of the signs in relation to one another’ (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 27). The possibilities of meanings that are excluded are called ‘the field of discursivity’ (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 111). This field is composed of all the possible paths that the discourse could have taken within the broadness of meanings but that, thanks to the identification of the nodal point, have been discarded. The field of discursivity also implies that no signifier will reach a fully fixed meaning, as ‘it determines at the same time the necessarily discursive character of any object, and the impossibility of any given discourse to implement a final suture’ (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 111).

However, in order for the nodal point to act as reference efficiently, the outside world, such as outside of the text, needs to be considered. To that end, some signs are called “elements”, they are ‘the signs whose meanings have not yet been fixed; signs that have multiple, potential meanings’ (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 27). That is why the aim of a discourse is here defined as an attempt to ‘transform elements into moments by reducing their polysemy to a fully fixed meaning’ (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 28). Laclau and Mouffe do not think that a fixed meaning can ever be reached fully as the field of discursivity is too rich, and polysemy is always a possibility. A discourse can never get rid of ambiguity, but it attempts to do it by relating the signs together in a specific way in order to reduce the potential for polysemy.

It is also necessary to nuance the way nodal points act as reference. They provide a base in order to create one “articulation” that link all signs and elements together in a specific order to establish a field of discursivity. Here, articulation is defined as ‘any practice establishing a relation among elements such that their identity is modified as a result of the articulatory practice’ (Laclau & Mouffe 1985: 105). Nevertheless, the nodal points are signs and elements themselves, and without any nodal point to relate to, they lie in polysemy, therefore called ‘floating signifiers’ (Laclau 1990: 28). They are defined as ‘the signs that different discourses struggle to invest with meaning in their own particular way’ (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 28). This analysis shows that a word or concept can occupy several positions simultaneously; one can be both nodal point and master signifier, and any word can be a floating signifier. It is the way they all interact with each other in the making of a field of discursivity, that shapes meaning. Indeed, for Laclau it is important to link this analysis to the social world and to the hegemony created by discourse: ‘To ‘hegemonize’ a content would therefore amount to fixing its meaning around a nodal point. The field of the social could thus be regarded as a

trench war in which different political projects strive to articulate a greater number of social signifiers around themselves' (Laclau 1990: 28).

Accordingly, Laclau and Mouffe's Discourse Analysis and the definitions provided by Winther Jørgensen and Philips will be used throughout this thesis in order to understand how the nodal point, as well as floating signifier, "COVID-19", establishes a field of discursivity and creates articulations within the analysed official speeches. As mentioned before, "COVID-19" is a new concept which makes it all the more a floating signifier with potential for new meanings and, more importantly, many different articulations.

This method is of course the most obvious one when it comes to analysing speeches and uncovering meanings and their construction, as well as the way they construct gender and concepts. However, there are limitations to this approach as it can be very literal and fail to see past the words delivered. This method focuses on what is said and is not always able to provide background or context. That is to say, the dynamics of meanings that are used and analysed might take the focus away from the bigger picture. This method is key to fulfil my aim, that is to understand how a meaning is constructed, however, it leaves other aspects of the speeches behind, such as the facts shared and the politics behind them. Nonetheless, this method does make the position of the researcher less obvious in the first place; when analysing the language used, I am relying only on what is seen and on the field of discursivity that is built. Nevertheless, both as a French person and as an expatriate, I have an understanding of the concept of Nation as it is claimed, since I was raised in France, that blurs the objectivity that my living-abroad situation might bring. For this reason, my position means that I am more vulnerable to the construction of meaning that takes place, but also more prone to understand it and to define it clearly.

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

1. Discourse Theory and Society

Following up on the methodology explained above, the theoretical framework I will use for this thesis when it comes to discourse theory is the one established in Winther Jørgensen & Philips' book when presenting Laclau and Mouffe's discourse theory. Once they have established how the discourse is to be analysed, they present its relationship to society and to

politics. In the context of my thesis in which I will be analysing the speeches of the current French President, this relationship is of utmost importance to my research.

‘Just as the structure of language is never totally fixed, so are society and identity flexible and changeable entities that can never be completely fixed’ (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 33), which means that discourse and society are intrinsically linked in the way they build and understand the world around them. Therefore, what is said participates in creating what is seen and felt and in return, what is seen and understood participates in influencing what is said. In other words, when delivering a speech, a country leader both establishes notions through their choice of nodal point and field of discursivity and reproduces stereotypes existing within society. It can be said that ‘Both people and society are understood as historical phenomena that are compelled to work on the basis of the existing structures, presupposing and ensuring continuity in the social’ (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 38).

That is when the notions of power, history and objectivity come into play, one questions how society is built within discourse and whether objectivity is attainable. Foucault and Fairclough, as well as Laclau and Mouffe do attempt to define and link these notions. “Politics”, in the context of discourse analysis, is understood as ‘a broad concept that refers to the manner in which we constantly constitute the social in ways that exclude other ways’ (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 36). Likewise, Foucault’s definition of power as well as theirs is explained as such: ‘Power is not understood as something which people possess and exercise over others, but as that which produces the social’ (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 37). In consequence, speeches delivered by people in power are “producing the social” in two ways: first, in the form of speeches through the use of language and discourse and second, through the power they possess. Political speeches are thus determinant in the construction of meaning for new concepts. In the context of the pandemic, or any important crisis, it is crucial to pay attention to the influence the people in power have as they are more likely to be listened to and hence to influence, in a way, how society as a whole defines some concepts. For instance, the French population listens to every official speech that Macron delivers as they are not numerous and are often expected to announce new measures during this health crisis. Even though people are listening for the instructions and potential changes in measures, they are exposed to the rest of the speech that does not necessarily state facts or communicate useful information but participates in building a meaning for Macron’s concept of nation and the new notion of “COVID-19”.

It is also key to understand Laclau and Mouffe's definition of objectivity, which is 'the historical outcome of political processes and struggles' (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 36). Therefore, they relate objectivity with ideology as it is understood as hiding the other potential meanings that would exist in the field of discursivity when retelling history. When there is only one point of view expressed, what claims to be objective is ideologic as it stands from somewhere and chooses one specific articulation of discourse. This is interesting when it comes to discourse analysis as the one I am about to undertake in this thesis. Indeed, 'the discourse analyst is often anchored in exactly the same discourses as he or she wants to analyse' (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 49) and consequently the social discourses I am embedded in, as well as Emmanuel Macron is, will influence my objectivity and analysis. Moreover, as a French person, the objective view of history and society that I might have when reading the speeches will be similar to the one of the speaker. However, this is how speeches of this kind work and Macron knows who he is addressing: the French people, therefore playing with a common context of references consistently used in public communication.

Following on the addressees, it is important to consider who the discourse is directed to when analysing and studying the choices made by the speaker. As a matter of fact, for Laclau and Mouffe the concept of "group formation" is essential throughout analysis. They understand it as 'a reduction of possibilities' and happens 'through a process by which some possibilities of identification are put forward as relevant while others are ignored' (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 44). In the context of this thesis, the group the speech is addressed to is apparently the French people and that is with this understanding that a certain field of discursivity will be determined. It is then important to remember that 'groups are not socially predetermined, they do not exist until they are constituted in discourse' (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 45). This is an important notion that comes into play when talking about concepts such as gender and the way it is socially predetermined the same way gendered groups are.

2. Discourse and Gender

Following up on the concept of groups mentioned above, Laclau and Mouffe as presented and developed by Winther Jørgensen and Philips use the example of the "man" identity, highlighting that there is little difference between "man" and "men", between the individual and the group. "Man" here is called by Lacan a 'master signifier' and by Laclau and Mouffe 'nodal points of identity' (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 42). This means that 'different discourses offer different content to fill this signifier' (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 42-43). In other words, the concept of "man" or "men" changes according to the context

in which it is used but it also has a definition that has been built and spread throughout time in different discourses offering a widespread definition and field of discursivity. When analysing discourse, it is important to take this into account and to acknowledge how these understanding play out and construct meaning for the audience. The following statement offers an overview of which meanings are associated to people according to their gender and how discourse plays a part in spreading these stereotypes:

‘The discursive construction of ‘man’ pinpoints what ‘man’ equals and what it differs from. For instance, a widespread discourse equates ‘man’ with ‘strength’, ‘reason’ and ‘football’ (and many other things) and contrasts that with ‘woman’: ‘passive’, ‘passion’ and ‘cooking’. The discourse thus provides behavioural instructions to people who identify with man and woman respectively which they have to follow in order to be regarded as a (real) man or woman.’ (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 43)

Therefore, when one asks what is masculine and feminine within discourse, it depends on established stereotypes such as fighting versus caring. Consequently, a belligerent discourse, mentioning war, fights, and violence, will be qualified as a masculine discourse because it embodies values that are stereotypically associated with men whereas a more caring and empathetic discourse, looking to reassure and show understanding to the listener, will be qualified as a more feminine discourse. I define caring according to Nancy Fraser’s statement around processes of social reproduction such as: ‘birthing and raising children, caring for friends and family members, maintaining households and broader communities’ (Fraser 2016). On this basis, I will use “feminine” and “masculine” to qualify the kind of discourses that will be analysed, based upon widespread stereotypes that exist within language rather than on realistic values that are shown in society, which would negate the existence of such a binary.

Winther Jørgensen and Philips consider the process of the construction of meaning within discourse as the worthiest of analysis as it is how one can understand how society is built through discursive elements. Indeed, the introduction of this book states:

‘Language, then, is not merely a channel through which information about underlying mental states and behaviour or facts about the world are communicated. On the contrary, language is a ‘machine’ that generates, and as a result constitutes, the social world. This also extends to the constitution of social identities and social relations. It means that changes in discourse are a means by which the social world is changed. Struggles at the discursive level take part in changing, as well as in reproducing, the social reality’ (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 9).

Society is reproducing what happens in language, thus giving the latter power over the social world. Discourse analysis is then essential in order to understand how the social world works, how it is built, and which nodal points are key to organising fields of discursivity. When it comes to gender, this theory is relevant as gender is considered to be a construct within language (Butler 2004), but then, from this point of view, the whole social world is one and since gender is part of the social world, it is reproduced by language in society at the same level as anything.

Butler gives more agency to gender in stating that ‘Gender is the mechanism by which notions of masculine and feminine are produced and naturalized, but gender might very well be the apparatus by which such terms are deconstructed and denaturalized’ (2004: 42) suggesting that within gender there is the potential to deconstruct the way language and discourse are reproducing it. She shows here that there is no fixed meaning, and that gender has many floating signifiers that can be given new meanings. Moreover, her definition of gender will be the reference throughout this thesis as ‘the apparatus by which the production and normalization of masculine and feminine take place along with the interstitial forms of hormonal, chromosomal, psychic, and performative that gender assumes’ (Butler 2004: 42). Gender is not fixed, just like its meaning and just like discourse. Her definition shows how the masculine and feminine are created around the performance of gender. It is important to also underline that ‘to claim that gender is a norm is not quite the same as saying that there are normative views of femininity and masculinity’ (Butler 2004: 42). Even though there are normative views of such concepts, views constructed through language, the norm surrounding gender is the fruit of these views and of a gendered language.

As Litosseliti and Sunderland write, ‘language is seen as shaping or constructing gender, not simply as a characteristic of it’ (2002: 5) which confirms what has been stated above. They even highlight an important issue:

‘Further, the idea of ‘differences’ seemed sometimes to be put forward as a form of cultural determinism, the implication being that the way women and men spoke was shaped by whether they were female or male. This rendered gender the equivalent of sex, and made it appear to be a convenient independent sociolinguistic variable like age.’ (Litosseliti & Sunderland 2002: 4)

Warning against the danger of essentialism and of relying on determinism, they show that gender and sex are different, and that the way language creates gender is different from the way that sex produces language. Here, I will consider gender as constructed by language as any element of the social world. Sex can be considered as a sociolinguistic element that could be

used for statistics however sex will not come into play here as what will be studied is discourse and language itself as opposed to any being that would be identified with a sex and gender.

Finally, a key concept in these speeches alongside “COVID-19” is the concept of “nation”. In that event, I will use Yuval-Davis’ approach on the relationship between gender and nation throughout my thesis. She states that ‘constructions of nationhood usually involve specific notions of both ‘manhood’ and ‘womanhood’ (Yuval-Davis 1997: 1), highlighting the fact that these concepts and meanings are both constructed and linked. Indeed, the meaning of nationhood relies on specific meanings for manhood and womanhood, creating a field of discursivity for masculinity and femininity within a nation. The argument is that ‘the discourse on gender and that on nation tend to intersect and to be constructed by each other’ (Yuval-Davis 1997: 4). “Nation” is defined as follows in this book: ‘Nations are situated in specific historical moments and are constructed by shifting nationalist discourses promoted by different groupings competing for hegemony’ (Yuval-Davis 1997: 4). She reminds the reader that although the concept of nation is often linked to the borders around a country, it is not what defines it, as the people within this territory are not always considered to be a part of the nation. Here, this thinking is called a fiction and its consequence is ‘to naturalize the hegemony of one collectivity and its access to the ideological apparatuses of both state and civil society’ (Yuval-Davis 1997: 11). This is of course the fruit of racism and explains its tight link to nationalism. Moreover, this highlights how only one group is generally in power within a nation, and therefore is in charge of defining the meanings that will govern its society. Indeed, the hegemonic group will define manhood and womanhood according to their definition of nationhood, related to their culture, history and language, without it applying to all the groups inhabiting the country that is defined as a nation. Yuval-Davis also tackles the issue of war as gendered since she writes: ‘constructions of manhood and womanhood which are assumed to have arisen in stateless hunter-gatherer societies have been the basis for the naturalization of the gender divisions of labour in militaries and wars’ (Yuval-Davis 1997: 93). War and military are considered as the embodiment of the nation, of the feeling of nationhood, and so they, along with the nation, are responsible for the construction of gendered meanings and stereotypes that are built around their values. Accordingly, I will consider nation as a fiction, as well as womanhood and manhood, and link them back to the notions of what will be called “masculine” and “feminine” throughout this thesis. As a matter of fact, Yuval-Davis highlights the difference between women and femininity in the context of war, and therefore of nation, stating that it is important to consider ‘the relationship between these images of femininity, which have been so necessary

for war discourse, and the link between women and peace which has been central to feminist and other war resisting movements' (Yuval-Davis 1997: 111). To clarify, this thesis will focus on these images of femininity that are reproduced through discourse and when women are mentioned, they will be understood as the group that is expected to reproduce these images.

ANALYSIS

I. Emmanuel Macron's addresses

In order to analyse the way in which the French president has been addressing the French people throughout the pandemic, I will focus on two speeches he delivered one year apart, in March 2020 and 2021, each time announcing tighter measures than the ones already in place. The focus of this analysis will be the discourse used by the speaker, here Emmanuel Macron, when talking to the people, when talking about the people, about the country and about the virus. I will analyse how the notions of "COVID-19" and "nation" are introduced, talked about, in relation to the way language is gendered. Accordingly, the lexical fields used around both nodal points will be analysed in order to understand how meaning is constructed around them and how these meanings and the fields of discursivity they call for might be gendered in certain ways.

In order to undertake this analysis, it is important to identify, according to Laclau and Mouffe's method explained by Winther Jørgensen and Philips:

- Nodal points, master signifiers and myths, which can be collectively labelled key signifiers in the organisation of discourse;
- The concept of chains of equivalence which refers to the investment of key signifiers with meaning;
- Concepts concerning identity: group formation, identity and representation; and
- Concepts for conflict analysis: floating signifiers, antagonism and hegemony.' (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 50).

Here I will consider the nodal point to be "COVID-19", the master signifiers to be "war" and "solidarity", and by extension, gender is included in the notion of master signifier as it participates in organising identity. The myths will be "society" as well as "nation". Myths are said to 'organise a social space' (Winther Jørgensen & Philips 2002: 50) and hence the idea of

nation is to be understood as a way to socially organise a space according to common culture, language, and history. The chains of equivalence will be established throughout the analysis. It can also be said that “COVID-19” is a floating signifier as it is a new concept and is even more floating during the 2020 speech as it was delivered in March, shortly after its appearance in everyday discourse.

With all these elements identified, I will also undertake a more linguistic analysis of the discourse used by Macron in order to understand the workings of the elements of the discourse through the language used. Figures of speech participate in creating meaning and are essential in establishing a field of discursivity as they play with polysemy and lexical fields as well-hidden meanings between words and concepts.

It is also important to contextualise these speeches and how they can be received. Each country leader has a different kind of power and addresses the population in a different way throughout this crisis. In France, several powerful figures have spoken to provide updates on the situation, such as the First Minister and the Health Minister. They have delivered speeches more regularly than the President and these speeches were more centred on the facts. However, the President only spoke several times and usually to announce important changes in the measures as the First Minister was in charge of the weekly updates on the situation. In France, the First Minister leads the government, but it can be considered that the President leads the Nation and has a bigger symbolical authority. Consequently, his speeches are presented as exceptional, as a special occasion and as very much official, with the national anthem playing at the beginning. Additionally, Emmanuel Macron is labelled as a centre-right or right-wing leader, with a government formed of right-wing individuals. The setting of this context is key to understand the way these speeches are able to construct a meaning for “COVID-19” within the French society.

1. Addressing the people

When addressing the people, Macron (2020, 2021) makes sure to use the first person of the plural, “we” in order to include himself and the government in any restrictions imposed on the population. This strategy, which has been commonly adopted in most discourses delivered by country leaders during the pandemic, gives a sense of proximity, security and understanding to the people. Following this idea, both speeches use the first-person singular “I”, repeating ‘I know’, ‘Believe me’, ‘I believe’, ‘I understand’ (2020, 2021). This practice highlights a need to be close to the people which is widely needed in the context of a health crisis. Therefore, it

can be argued that the use of the first person in order to close the gap between power and people pertains to the caring register, which is a type of discourse inherently feminine (Fraser 2016). It is also important to note that the two key concepts mentioned when addressing the people are to act in solidarity and to avoid panicking. On one hand, the call for solidarity, which seems necessary in order to give the people reasons to follow the rules, links back to the notion of caring, which contributes to feminine discourse. On the other hand, asking the population not to panic is a call to reason, communicating the idea that whoever is talking is in charge of the situation as well as the idea that panicking is useless, frivolous, and even weak. The concept of “panic” pertains to the feminine register, and the call to not act like this, places the speech in a masculine authoritative voice, reassuring in way that is also criticizing the listener.

As mentioned before, the idea of solidarity is a master signifier throughout the speeches as its meaning can be built on previous discourses. That is why it is a word that can be considered as gendered or with gendered values and also as a word which introduces an ambivalence. As a matter of fact, “solidarity” here depends on the field of discursivity. In the context where the nodal point is “COVID-19”, the solidarity that is called for is the one surrounding a health crisis. The situation of a health crisis, then, would call for a more feminine register in a world where health and care are closely related and pertain to the context of reproduction, as stated by Fraser (2016). However, “COVID-19” is here presented as more similar to the other master signifier, “war”. Both “war” and “solidarity” are of feminine grammatical gender in French however, as stated before “war” is related to notions of violence, fight and has historically been a men’s world (Wingfield & Bucur 2006). As a consequence, the mention of solidarity in the context of war introduces a gender ambiguity within the discourse and a new field of discursivity for “COVID-19” in which healthcare lexicon is not as predominant as the lexical field of war.

The communication is also based on truth as it is repeated several times ‘I will tell you the truth’ (2020) and Macron also mentions scientists as reference in order to root his speech in facts and reason. ‘Information is transparent, and we will keep communicating it’ (2020) is a clear call against any theories that would prevent people from following the rules; the speaker gives a voice to more objective voices, according to the listener, in order to communicate information that is not relative to his person, so that people who may dislike him will be more likely to listen to someone else’s message. However, as mentioned above, Laclau and Mouffe question objectivity and relate it to ideology. What in discourse might be perceived as objectivity is the result of history, politics, and ideology, and is not neutral. Science is however

fundamentally represented as masculine (as mentioned above by Winther Jørgensen and Philips, the master signifier “man” is often linked to “reason”) and hence insisting on facts and forbidding panic shows the delivery of a masculine discourse.

2. Talking about the people

When it comes to talking about the people, Macron, as mentioned before, usually includes himself. However, he also regularly thanks some people such as hospital staff, teachers, policemen, and when doing so he states that it is on everyone’s behalf, placing himself in the group of people who are not exercising any of these professions and should thank them, making the “we” more ambiguous. Following these statements, Macron praises people responsible for care services, education, and security. These sectors have inherent gender stereotypes (Fraser 2016), and the speech makes sure to mention the care sector, which resonates as feminine, and the security sector, which is understood as masculine.

Relating back to Laclau and Mouffe’s theory, the French people, considered here as the society in which the speech is declared, are a “myth”. That is to say, the social space they occupy is built within discourse, as the French nation is also considered a myth. In order to reinforce this myth, the speaker uses possessive words such as ‘our country’ (2020) and personifies it, saying that ‘France has never had to take such decisions before’ (2020) so that the listeners feel the sense of community conveyed and relate to the repeated use of “we” throughout the speeches, feeling as part of it.

As another way to reinforce the myth of French people, the nodal point here is key as it is pictured as an enemy to get rid of. Therefore, the meaning of “French people” takes another dimension by association with the nodal point: it becomes the idea of a nation, of a people who needs to stand together in order to defeat the enemy that the virus is identified as. Moreover, to encourage people to follow the rules, Macron shares the aim of ‘going back to the French *art de vivre*’ (2021) which communicates the idea that there is only one way of living as a French person and accentuates the idea of the united nation. Being French in these speeches is considered as a personality and identity trait that everyone listening to the speeches share and consequently, the field of discursivity of this very notion is reduced to the values that are communicated by the speaker. Moreover, the French identity here is singular, not plural. As mentioned before, the concept of nation is built around a hegemonic group, here the French people. Their way of living is as one and for this reason, if a French person who is considered as part of the nation is expected to be living one way, then French women are all expected to

act in similar ways, and the same goes for French men. This idea of hegemony when it comes to nation is expected to be reproduced in gender, since both concepts define each other, according to Yuval-Davis (1997).

3. Talking about the country: War terminology

The speech delivered in March 2020 is based on an extended war metaphor. Macron (2020) starts by stating that ‘France has never had to make tougher decisions in times of peace’, however, it might be understood that it still is not a “time of peace”, since later on, an anaphora can be observed, with the repetition of ‘We are at war!’ six times at the beginning of new paragraphs. This figure of speech insists on this idea being the key argument of the discourse and transforms it into a truthful statement, as it is repeated over and over. In order to reinforce the idea of war, its lexical field is used throughout the speech. “War” is a master signifier that already has a clear meaning and lexical field, as it is not a new concept. Accordingly, the figures of speech used are common and well-known, making the communication more efficient. It is probable that one of the reasons this signifier has been chosen in relation to the nodal point is that it is a more popular comparison and situation is people’s mind than the one of a health crisis. Historically, speeches have been made famous in times of crises relating more to violence and/or war rather than health crises, as a consequence the imaginary of people is more likely to react to war speech. Therefore, the field of discursivity of “COVID-19” has been chosen not to be the straightforward one, tackling the care and health notions as well as using numbers and facts to explain the situation but rather the one of war, able to rally a nation, to unite the country and to win a fight.

Firstly, the idea of ‘fighting’ against the virus is introduced in the 2020 speech, highlighting that the medical staff are ‘on the front line’ and that the people, including the speaker, need to ‘protect’ themselves. This reinforces the idea of solidarity, which is mentioned as one of the key values, giving it however a masculine discourse undertone. Indeed, if Macron includes himself in the people and ask everyone to act in solidarity with each other as part of a ‘national effort’ during what is qualified as a ‘war against the virus’, this same solidarity is justified by a masculine discourse, hence losing some of its feminine value in the speech to be placed in the extended metaphor of war. However, the speech continues with a call for ‘national union’ and a statement that ‘the nation will support its children’. These motherhood values highlight the feminine caring aspect of the discourse and could then be linked to the call to solidarity. War discourse is ambivalent when it comes to gender as on one hand, there is violence, death and this has been where men were historically. On the other hand, there is union,

solidarity and the nation, which is the one people are fighting for and defending, but also the one who is supposed to protect its people like a mother, never like a father. Note that in this context, it is always the word “nation” that is chosen and not “country” as “nation” is grammatically a feminine word in French as opposed to “country” which is masculine. As mentioned before, the concept of nation is a linguistic myth when it comes to discourse analysis. It is also a myth that can act as master signifier because its meaning is closely related to the one of war in the history of speeches. As stated previously, in times of war the notion of nation is key to unite the people and convince them to fight. Therefore, the meaning of “nation” is well-known amongst the listeners. The main method used in these speeches in order to provide understanding around the nodal point is to use strong and common master signifiers in order to clarify the field of discursivity that the nodal point is situated in. It appears that the meaning is brought by the master signifiers rather than the nodal point, since it is a new concept which has yet to acquire the widespread meanings that “war” and “nation” already have for instance. “Nation” is both linguistically a myth and semantically a fiction. Its meaning is considered a popular fiction created by the hegemonic group ruling the nation (Yuval-Davis 1997), and its place as a linguistic myth reinforces its role in introducing meanings. Indeed, the meanings that are linked to this concept are constructed through a linguistic myth. Macron, as part of the hegemonic group, shares an understanding of this concept that will allow the creation of war dynamics, and by extension, gendered dynamics.

Macron states: ‘We are not fighting against an army or another nation, but the enemy is here, invisible, elusive, and progresses’ (2020). Identifying a common enemy is useful in order to unify the country against it and make them more willing to fight it in war times. Here, this speech does the same in putting everyone on the same side against the virus. Strategically, that would mean that the population will follow the rules more easily but also reinforces the idea of a nation. The enemy is masculine and attacks a feminine nation, therefore the people need to follow the rules their nation gives through this speech, through its government, in order to be protected as well as to protect the perennity of the nation itself. The metaphor ends with the statement ‘We will win’ (2020); a short and clear sentence that embodies several values mentioned before: togetherness, truthfulness, and conviction. As a matter of fact, since Macron has been declaring to be telling the truth, only the truth, his speech is embedded within an objectivity, supported by numbers and facts, which makes all the surrounding statements easier to believe.

The war register pertains, at first glance, to the masculine discourse, as it is linked to violence and because in history, war was always related to men, who were the ones called to war. Indeed, Wingfield and Bucur state:

‘collective memory of the world wars is both selective and essentially gendered. Public discourse about the wars encoded heroism as male and paved the way to commemorative practices that celebrated and reinforced already existing gender dichotomies’ (2006: 10).

The fact that this is the extended metaphor chosen to guide the speech shows that the masculine discourse has been chosen to be dominant in this instance. The second speech does not mention war explicitly, however it does use a discourse that could be identified as pertaining to the “war effort”, inviting people to stay mobilised, to continue the ‘national effort’ and not to ‘give in into tiredness or anger’ (2021). It takes for granted the fact that listeners, the French people, have now adopted the meaning of “COVID-19” that was established in the 2020 speech and hence does not see the need to be as explicit when it comes to the field of discursivity. In this speech, “COVID-19” is less of a floating signifier and more of a nodal point. Firstly, this lexical field is used to look back on the past year, repeating words from the 2020 speech such as ‘general mobilisation’, ‘do not panic’, ‘I know, believe me’ (2020, 2021) confirming the continuity between both speeches. The second speech also mentions the word ‘pincers’, explaining that the vaccine and the month-long lockdown will allow the country to ‘make a pincer attack on the virus’ (2021) and allow the country to open up slowly from mid-May. This saying refers to military strategy and acts as a reminder that the war against the virus is still ongoing and that it is necessary to hold on.

Furthermore, this speech is more focused on giving strength to the population in order for them not to give up, this meets the idea of the war effort where everyone was called to keep the morale up during dark times. Indeed, Macron starts by mentioning the ‘heroic acts’ that have been done during this ‘hardship’, stating that ‘together, we resisted’ (2021). The use of a resistance narrative is also relevant to the war metaphor and links back to the notion of the virus circulating invisibly among people. Referring back to a war period such as the Second World War when within one country there could be the ones resisting the power in place and the ones collaborating, which is highlighted when the speaker states that ‘the irresponsibility of some should not ruin the efforts of everyone’ (2021). Looking back, France values the courage of the “Résistants” as opposed to the inaction of the people or the cowardice of the collaborationists, as they are the ones who “won the war” and thereupon embody the paroxysm of masculinity. However, this notion is ambivalent as in these speeches Macron asserts his power over language

and urges the people to obey his orders. It can be understood that Macron identifies his power with the one that was leading the Resistance during World War II, Charles de Gaulle, rather than the actual French leader, Philippe Pétain, who was collaborating with Germany, the enemy at the time. Resisting meant to keep fighting, to stay in a state of war, therefore Macron makes sure that to resist in front of the common enemy is understood as the rightful fight.

After dark times come lighter times, as the history of war tells us. That is why Macron mentions that ‘we will see the end of the tunnel soon’ and calls the period when France was not in lockdown ‘days of freedom’ (2021). The contrast he offers indicates the urgency and importance of the situation, insisting on the need to ‘stay strong, united and determined’ (2021). This last statement is a reminder of the need for solidarity, however the words chosen here are ones that evoke a masculine discourse of fighting rather than a solidarity based on empathy and feelings which would be related to a more feminine discourse. Moreover, once the war against the virus is over, Macron says that ‘we will rebuild this path of hope that will allow us to slowly go back to normal’ (2021) which shows that the solidarity and war effort must persist once it is over, and that the unity asked for during war times are ones that would like to be kept on. The notion of “building” contributes to masculine discourse here once again as construction is known to require physical strength and be an overly male-dominant area. However, in war times, “rebuilding the nation” also meant “have children”, which is calling both men and women to procreate and women to take care of them, relating back to the notion of social reproduction (Fraser 2016), a task attributed to women while men are in charge of production, when they are not in charge of destruction during war times. Yuval-Davis also highlights these gender roles:

‘Wars are seen to be fought for the sake of the ‘women and children’, and the fighting men are comforted and reassured by the knowledge that ‘their women’ are keeping the hearth fires going and are waiting for them to come home’ (1997: 111).

The responsibilities given to women are discredited by the fact that they are the women belonging to men. However, this quote does show the ambivalence and dependence of one gendered role on the other. Indeed, men are fighting to protect women, while women are working and waiting to comfort men. Yuval-Davis highlights the fact that ‘while men have been constructed as naturally linked to warfare, women have been constructed as naturally linked to peace’ (1997: 94), thus showing the natural gendered dynamics inseminated within society. If women are linked to peace, just as they are linked to care, then a healthy population is a peaceful population. Men are thus linked to both production and destruction, here the

destruction of the disease is the main idea, as well as the production of a cure, as women are embodied as nurses, caring for the sick while the masculine mission is being undertaken.

The war discourse can be considered as gender ambivalent as it plays with both masculine and feminine discourse in order to convince the people to lead a fight. The values that are considered masculine and feminine both prove to be essential in order to depict a war situation and to get the people to obey new rules and adapt to an unforeseen context. Both feminine and masculine values are given important roles and could be assumed to be treated equally. However, these values are very stereotypical of what is expected from men and women in society and how a gendered discourse is, on one hand, using these engrained stereotypes in order to communicate more efficiently and on another hand, is participating in the spread of stereotypes through a gendered language. Language and discourse do exist within a society that has been built on gender stereotypes and values, and consequently efficient communication keeps using these codes instead of deconstructing them. It is clear that the current health crisis is happening within a capitalist system and therefore the discourses delivered in countries such as France are embedded in a gendered discourse as capitalism and patriarchy are intrinsically linked.

If I related this analysis to Laclau and Mouffe, what can be said is that the nodal point seems to be gender neutral at first glance and that seems to be highlighted by the choice of master signifiers that are both masculine and feminine. Indeed, the two predominant concepts are the ones of war and of nation and solidarity. All these words use “la” in French, however, “war” does call for concepts that are considered as masculine when it comes to the field of discursivity this master signifier calls for. Solidarity and nation are more widely understood as embodying what are considered feminine values. However, these concepts are interdependent and intricately linked, as war usually implies the necessity for the notions of solidarity and nation to be used in order to unify the people. Therefore, these concepts form a chain of equivalence creating a new meaning for the nodal point, which is also a floating signifier, especially in the first speech. This explains why the warfare discourse is heavily present in the first speech, establishing these meanings, whereas in the second speech, the lexical field used is less explicitly linked to war, since it is expected that the listeners have already understood that “COVID-19” is not so much a floating signifier anymore but has a clear field of discursivity in which war is the main meaning it is related to.

4. Talking about the virus:

Since the virus is still a floating signifier, the speeches manage to be centred around this nodal point without mentioning it too much. Indeed, it is important that the speaker uses notions that the listener is familiar with in order to give a clearer meaning to the nodal point. The aim of the first speech is to provide a field of discursivity to “COVID-19” and, by association, to situate it within a gendered language such as French. As I will explain later in this thesis, it had been decided in 2020 that “COVID-19” would be grammatically feminine, using the article “la”, however, the way language is gendered goes further than the grammatical decision and is inscribed in the lexical field and notions that surround the word, as well as the values that are attributed to it, according to the widespread stereotypes, which in language are translated through master signifiers.

“COVID-19” is also making its way towards being a master signifier in the way the discourse around it in France has been based on this war metaphor. However, it seems that the fact that newspapers and the government have established this meaning is not enough to determine a master signifier on the same level as “war”, “nation” or “man”. As a matter of fact, the intentions behind this metaphor are too numerous that the meaning might not be relevant in the long term. This meaning is built around the urgency of the situation and the need for a reaction and obedience from the population. If the virus is described as a dangerous enemy, if everyone is together in the fight and if everyone works together, the victory will come earlier. These are the ideas communicated in the speeches. However, once the pandemic will end, this meaning will not be as necessary. For a while, the discourse around victory might be spread, especially in an attempt at glorifying oneself and their decision as well as congratulating everyone for their effort. Nevertheless, once this time enters in History, the field of discursivity created by Macron might be modified and go back to a meaning closer to the health register rather than the war one. This meaning comes in a time of crisis, and as mentioned before, it is important to rely on structures we already know in these moments. Outside of the context of crisis, it will be interesting to see what other meanings will emerge for “COVID-19” and how these meanings will interact with gender. Therefore, “COVID-19” will stay a floating signifier until it is a thing of the past as its relationship with the present is key in building its meaning within society.

5. Reception

While Emmanuel Macron attempts to build a meaning for “COVID-19”, the authority of his discourse is to be nuanced. Of course, a majority of people did listen to these speeches, whether they agree or not with his ideas and decisions. The war metaphor was thus brought into

the mind of many people, even if they did not think it was an appropriate field of discursivity to put a disease in. Moreover, the gender dynamics that are used throughout the speech are used as codes rather than ideologies. In fact, it is not clear whether Macron would agree with the typical gendered structures of war however, he uses a discourse that the French society and the nation he controls are familiar with. The main difference throughout this analysis is that meaning is built on common knowledge shared amongst a nation, rather than a common agreement. No one agrees to come to an understanding that “COVID-19” is heavily gendered through the military lexical field, however, everyone knows the codes the speaker is using. It is then easier for the journalists to continue using this metaphor in their articles and build a more consistent and spread out meaning of “COVID-19” outside of the presidential speeches.

II. France and ‘la’ COVID: Gender ambiguity

In both of the speeches studied, Macron does not gender “COVID-19” but uses formulas to avoid it, saying ‘the pandemic’, ‘the virus’ (2020, 2021). However, in other instances official speeches have had to gender this word and the decision taken adds a layer to the war metaphor and the masculinisation of the speeches about fighting against, what will be decided to be a feminine enemy.

France decided in the middle of the crisis that “COVID-19” had to make its place in the dictionary and, just like every other word in the French language, it needed a grammatical gender. French does not have an official neutral gender. People had been commonly using the masculine “le” to talk about coronavirus. However, the decision was taken that it would now be feminine since “pandemic” and “disease” are grammatically feminine words (but virus is masculine). It is argued that “COVID-19” refers to the disease while “SARS-CoV-2” refers to the virus (Ropert 2020) and therefore it would be logical to use feminine articles to talk about the disease, and nevertheless the war would be against both masculine and feminine forces, or rather, against the masculine “virus” which is the cause for the “disease”. Macron seems to be using “virus” more often in his speeches, which adds up to the predominantly masculine discourse he is delivering. The article by Ropert interviews Sandrine Reboul-Touré (2020) who talks about how many new words have appeared since the beginning of the pandemic and how the lexical field of the war has been predominant since Macron’s speech on March 16th. She explains the influence of Canadian French over the choice of the gender while highlighting that it is usual for English words to be feminine in Canadian French and masculine in European French.

This choice generated debates and people declared that, now that it was clear that the coronavirus was going to be long and annoying, “COVID-19” had to be grammatically feminine. Of course, the choice seems to have been purely linguistic and grammatical, however, one cannot underestimate the influence language has on the population. Even though many people still use the masculine form, the official discourse talks about a feminine pandemic which is spreading and that a very masculine power has to fight. The analysis of the belligerence of the discourse delivered by the French President makes this contrast even more obvious. However, the word “war” is a feminine word with very masculine values, and the “nation” people are fighting for during the war is embodied as a mother, in order to give strength to the people fighting. The feminine here is the force that pushes the masculine violence.

More recently, the two most eminent French dictionaries, Le Robert and Larousse have unveiled the new words that will enter their 2022 editions, and among them is “covid” for Le Robert and “Covid” or “Covid-19” for Larousse. When it comes to their gender, the ambiguity persists: Le Robert considers it to be ‘masculine or feminine’ and Larousse thinks of it as ‘feminine or masculine’ (France Télévisions 2021), meaning that the first grammatical gender mentioned is the most correct one, but the other one is also accepted. Le Robert also states that it is the way the word will be used that will settle the debate in the end.

Therefore, the gender ambiguity surrounding the meaning given to “COVID-19” goes as far as its grammatical gender, reinforcing the ambiguity of its own field of discursivity. The relationship between the concepts of “war” and “nation” as master signifiers is ambiguous too. Although they embody strongly gendered values such as violence versus motherhood, they also introduce gendered conflicts. Firstly, both war and nation are represented by men who lead them. The embodiment of the nation in France is in fact Marianne, but she is an imaginary woman created in order to accentuate the need for the French men to fight for a woman, to protect her. War ideology is based on heterosexism. Women as human beings are thus absent from the concept of war and nation, but they are still very much there. During the World Wars, ‘they also learned to become more self-reliant, often taking on traditionally masculine roles’ (Wingfield & Bucur 2006: 6). Women gained independence during the wars, acting in the shadows, being the ones doing the production. However, ‘female patriotism was so closely identified with procreation’ (Wingfield & Bucur 2006: 9), in order to make sure that their role in reproduction was not to be forgotten and rather put to the forefront as their main task; production was still a man’s job, taken over by women because men had to save and protect their nation. One can note that the protection offered by men to an allegorical woman, Marianne,

the nation, was to be the same they should offer any woman in the country, taking away any of their identity, independence, ability to act and think for themselves.

These ideas around wartime are important to keep in mind when analysing these speeches that declare war and use wartime discourse. COVID-19 is defined as being an enemy, invisible but deadly. The disease is spreading, and everyone is exposed, regardless of their gender. However, people who are “in the frontlines” are more exposed than others and they take over the place of the men fighting for their country. The fact that the gender of these persons is not defined and is varied makes it more difficult to gender the situation. Indeed, the defending of Marianne worked in a context where heterosexism was made to be dominant legally and where only men were sent to fight. Women were asked to fight in their own way in order to keep the spirits of the men up, which was considered as normal in a society made by men for men, where their needs came first, and in a context where in protecting the nation, they were protecting the women as well. Here, we have the medical personnel in the frontlines, partly by choice since it is the profession they chose to do, even though the current conditions were not expected by anyone. Their motivation is to save lives and not to conquer territory or to defend the nation. Here, every life matters which blurs the concept of nation. To represent the medical staff as protecting Marianne seems unnecessary. The speeches are more likely to be directed at the people “staying back”, which would have been the women, to make them understand the importance of their actions in order to make the work of the people in the frontlines easier. This schema is reproducing the typical wartime one, and the notion of nation comes into play when creating a group, and a myth, within language, with the aim to represent a structure that is understandable for everyone and to communicate the dynamics that are needed in order to defeat the virus. Gender only comes into play to reiterate historical structures and dynamics built in war discourses.

Therefore, the ambiguity around the grammatical gender of “COVID-19” comes from an ambiguity in its attributed meaning. When it comes to wartime discourse, gender structures are used to unite people and incite them to go to war against a common enemy, usually another country, as opposed to their nation. In order to reproduce wartime discourse, Macron uses master signifiers and chains of equivalence that have relied on gender historically. However, since the current situation is only described as a war through his speeches, the way the discourse around it is gendered depends on his own definition. It is a different kind of war, introducing different gender dynamics in a more modern society where it is recognised that everyone is doing their part in fighting against the virus on their scale, hence the discourse struggles to

inscribe itself in a specific gender dynamic, as it is illustrated through the difficulty to choose an article, is it “la” disease or “le” virus?

CONCLUSION

To conclude, the meaning of “COVID-19” is gradually built throughout the speeches delivered by Emmanuel Macron during the pandemic through an extended metaphor of war. The French president chooses to create a meaning and a field of discursivity for this concept in the first speech studied and uses several figures of speech and linguistic tools in order to anchor the meaning he wants to give to “COVID-19” in the mind of the people. This construction of meaning is undertaken in order to fulfil several aims, the main one being to unite everyone against the virus and to make sure they follow the orders given by the French government. “COVID-19” starts off as a floating signifier and Macron sets it as the nodal point and defines a clear field of discursivity in his first speech, enabling him to use warfare lexicon in his following speeches without having to set the scene again, the floating of the signifier having been reduced. In order for this construction of meaning to be fully effective, it was necessary for other kinds of discourses to pick up on the usage made by Macron and spread it in newspaper articles and any form of communication surrounding the virus, which was done thanks to the efficient and repetitive way Macron set up the war metaphor in his first speech.

This construction of meaning was therefore bound to generate gendered dynamics within the discourse surrounding the concept of “COVID-19” as French is a language that is inherently gendered through its grammar. Indeed, the warfare discourse is embedded in gendered values that see the masculine idea of fighting and violence oppose the feminine idea of peace and care. In order to build this meaning, Macron calls for myths such as the concept of nation, which also calls for gendered values. Nation and war go together when building ideas of womanhood and manhood in one society. These two master signifiers play with the gendered dynamics that have established their meaning throughout history in order to build a clearer meaning for “COVID-19”, one that would place it within the French language and its understanding of gender through discourse and grammar. The ambivalence of gender values in these two concepts, nation and war, sets up to create an ambiguity when it comes to giving a grammatical gender to “COVID-19”. It has been concluded that it is probably the most popular gendering of the word that will be accepted on the long term. However, it opens a road for a new reflexion: it is clear that grammatical gender has had an impact on the way French people

have built their ideologies as a nation throughout history. Nevertheless, with the influence of languages that do not gender concepts, and from which new words are coming, the grammatical gender seems to be replaced by another form of gendering: discourse. The construction of meaning through discourse, and here speeches, calls for more abstract notions of gender and ones that are embedded within society. The use of master signifiers when attempting to provide a meaning for a floating signifier, however, does highlight the gendered dynamics that have been involved in the making of the meaning of these master signifiers, raising awareness on how deep the gendered structures go within language and discourse.

Building new meanings could then be an opportunity to build new gendered structures or to attempt to get rid of them. It seems difficult however, to do so when attempting to unite a group of people in order to communicate an important and urgent message, as gendered discourse here helps to provide a common understanding of the situation and of what is expected from the nation. Nevertheless, deconstructing meanings such as the one of nation could lead to more inclusive concepts and images. Gender and language are so closely interrelated, especially in grammatically gendered languages, that discourse is the key to deconstruct harmful meanings and build new ones, starting with master signifiers as they are the ones that shape the discourse.

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