The Role of Differentiated Government Actors
in the Reform of Gender-inclusive Language

Introduction

As the world is moving onto a more egalitarian age, public awareness of gender equality is expected to rise. As a result, governments around the world have been scrambling for different actions attempting to react to such a trend. Notably, the Swedish government, in particular, has shown great interest in altering Swedish into an gender-inclusive language (Millies, 2011). Early this year, the local British Columbia government in Canada has also been making sweeping changes in their laws and regulations, adopting over 600 instances of gender-inclusive language (Haig, 2021). Nevertheless, on the opposite spectrum, countries like France had adopted a completely different approach. In February 2021, politicians in France had proposed a bill banning the usage of "écriture inclusive" (gender-neutral language) in government documents, citing its potential "danger" towards French heritage (Sullivan, 2021). Such perplexing and largely opposite actions, of course, provided us with an interesting discourse. How and why governments across the world have such divided reactions towards the issue of incorporating gender-inclusive language. Therefore, this essay will attempt to look into the various government actors who are precipitating the diversity in the reaction to the issue, by first defining why the incorporation of gender-inclusive language into government is an issue, then introducing the role of the differentiated government actors in regard to this issue.

The issue of inclusive language

To demonstrate that the topic of inclusive language reform is a contemporary world issue, this essay would attempt to show the persistence of the topic throughout its existence, and its lack of a universal consensus among the populace.

As described by Spender (1990), language itself is the critical component in the construction of a male superiority mentality. As a result, it is evident that language was seen as a major source for women's oppression, and a tool for reinforcing patriarchal ideas, thus it has long been regarded as an important side for changes by the Feminist advocate (Pauwels, 1999). From the beginning of second-wave Feminism, inclusive language has started to gain traction among the public, which at first the aim is to expose sexism in language by analyzing sexist elements within the language (Pauwels, 2011). Nevertheless, despite the public interest for

the potential language reform, changes are only limited to the educational institutions with limited success (Pauwels, 2011). Owing to the advancement in gender-related studies, a new approach is adopted to conduct further language reform (Pauwels, 2011). Yet, inclusive language continues to face various challenges and opposition as shown in the beginning. Actors around the world have various and often opposing points of view, even within their own camp. As indicated by the language reform in Sweden, regardless of the supportive stance from the government, they still failed to make significant progress due to disagreement with other pro-inclusive language camps over the details for the reform (Milles, 2011). Indeed, making changes to a language is challenging, to say the least, the notable three aspects of the complex nature of language, the lack of consensus among stakeholders and globalisation of language usage are the main obstacles for progress (Milles, 2011). For such the discourse for gender-inclusive language is an ongoing issue that lacks a universal solution, hence could be defined as a global issue.

The roles of the government

As mentioned before, there is a lack of consensus among stakeholders, which is especially true and further exacerbated when it comes to the government. As demonstrated throughout the course, the government itself is not a uniform actor. Due to structural, organisational and personal background differences, the government could carry different characteristics, even opposing ones. Therefore, the following section will demonstrate the role of actors within the government in regard to the issue of inclusive language, from three main departments: The legislative branches, the education or language department and the legal branches.

To begin with, in the legislative branches, government actors could support or against such reform due to political affiliation and election concerns. It is easy to understand that the legislative structure of the government is often divided into parties according to each of their own political ideologies. For example, although not directly associated with liberalism and socialism, the individualistic and egalitarianism beliefs of the two political theories respectively did indeed provide an incentive for the associated parties to have a leaning towards adopting feminist practices (Ferree, 2012; Taylor, Tadlock & Poggione, 2014)). On the contrary, the opposing side of the political spectrum would often oppose feminist custom, due to the incomparable political thinking model, as demonstrated by the almost unanimous antifeminist and traditional stance of the rightist party within all European countries (Campbell & Erzeel, 2018; Taylor, Tadlock & Poggione, 2014)). Needless to say, political

affiliation contributes greatly to the consideration of inclusive language reform, yet it is not the full picture. Alternatively, the consideration over election results is also a major factor in determining legislative branches' attitude towards reform. Undoubtedly, the essence of being a politician is getting elected, therefore as public support over particular issues could potentially swing the votes into their competing camps, politicians often have great interest in adopting stances according to public support (Tomz & Houweling, 2008; Banda, 2019). As demonstrated by the Swedish language reform case, which due to traditionally high public support over gender-equality issues, the Swedish government is among the first to officially adopt a pro-language reform stance (Milles, 2011). Interestingly, another example in demonstrating such thinking is the Party for Freedom in the Netherland, which despite their nationalist and conservative attitude, did actually support gender-related reform (Campbell & Erzeel, 2018). Admittedly, their reasoning behind is voting concerns, as they argued rightist parties which adopt more feminist-friendly could attract more women voters, which in fact does (Campbell & Erzeel, 2018). Hence, in above we can see how party ideology and voting concern dictated the actions which the legislative branches would take towards language reform.

In the education or language department, as seen in the early development of inclusive language, educational institutions are often the forerunners in the pursuit of reform (Pauwels, 2011). Yet, despite their enthusiasm, they do have their own concerns over the progress and process of language reform, notably the concern over understanding and correctness in an official publication, public acceptance and the global trending of multilingualism (Milles, 2011). As of the case of Sweden, the official department responsible for the country's official language authority has, indeed, turned down the proposal of replacing the third-person pronoun, "*han*", into the more inclusive and popular word of "*hen*", despite the pro-reformist stance of the institution (Milles, 2011). They cited that the adaptation of an artificially constructed word like "*hen*" is potentially problematic, as it is difficult to establish a new pronoun in a language system (Milles, 2011). Similar to what politicians have faced in the legislative branches, the public acceptance of the usage of reformed new words is also a concern (Milles, 2011). While the Swedish public might be more friendly towards gender-inclusive reforms, such a view is not universally shared among countries around the world, and in fact, even in a pro-reformist nation like Sweden, homophobia still exists within the public, hence a caution progression is often needed to be adopted (Milles, 2011). Concurrently, the Swedish institution also cited a different reason for reform consideration,

the global trend of multilingualism. Under globalisation, our world is connected more than ever, for such the rise of a language Franca like English is almost inevitable. Although language reform might prove to be successful on a domestic level, governments now must think out of their own national boundaries and address the potential new challenges that arose due to the reform. According to Milles (2011), new language learners and second language users are expected to face the ripple effect caused by the reform, problems like greater complexity and less understandability (Pauwels, 2011). Such showed that the educational or language institutions are, therefore, subjected to numerous concerns as to what degree of reform is needed, and would not hesitate to oppose any proposal that might potentially contrast to their own concerns.

Last but not least, the legal branches. As we can see from the educational or language department, it is already quite difficult to make significant changes in a language system. There are many things that must be attended to, including understandability, complexity, needless to say, such challenges are even greater when it comes to the legal branches, which are not just responsible for the day-to-day speeches, hence requiring even greater attention. As Revell, Schuh and Moisan (2008) have discussed, in a legality sense, "person" includes more than just individuals, it also includes corporate bodies. Therefore, it is not just a matter of replacing pronouns like, "he", "she", "him" and "her" with "he or she" when it comes to rewriting the languages in legal documents (Revell et al., 2008). Indeed, lawyers have expressed their concerns that overusing these "cumbersome word strings" within the legal text would only trouble lawmakers and other related personnel (Revell et al., 2008). For instance, a lawyer from Hanover has expressed his concerns over language reform could make bad examples, for others to follow, as if once changes are made, more will be underway, and as such would be simply too complex for any legal entity to understand linguistically (Nicholson, 2021). As a result, it is clear to see that within the legal branches, there have been great concerns over the serious repercussions of language reform. Nonetheless, many of them simply continued with their research on making reforms in legal documents, because of government order. Despite the stress in extreme cautious actions, these legal practitioners are nevertheless part of the government branches. Hence, required to follow the direction which the government has set. For example, in the aforementioned discussion, although have expressed their view over the language reform, they continued their discussion and came up with several principles and guidelines for the Canadian government to adopt in case of reform, as it is simply their duty to do so (Revell et al., 2008). For that, we

could see in the legal branches, legal practitioners within the government would often follow the government general direction over reform issues, yet would still voice up their concerns over legality and complexity of the reform, and act as an advisory role in helping the government making solution that is both legally viable and gender-inclusive.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this essay has provided an overview of the factors which dictated the actors within the government in the issue regarding gender-inclusive language reform. This has shown that despite popular imagination, the government is not a homogeneous group of actors, and in fact is very much differentiated, each with its own concerns over a particular issue.

1769 words

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