

ARTICLE

# #JeSuisCirconflexe: The French spelling reform of 1990 and 2016 reactions

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## ABSTRACT

In February 2016 the French spelling reform of 1990, which introduced changes to approximately 2,000 words, became the object of discussion online, after it was announced that the new spellings would be included in textbooks from September. Analysing a corpus of tweets, containing key terms from the online discussion, *JeSuisCirconflexe*; *ognon* and *réforme orthographe*, this study gives an insight into the reactions to this governmental linguistic intervention, the recurring themes in their discourse and how this can be interpreted as prescriptive or purist behaviour. Although previous studies have extensively analysed reactions to the 1996 spelling reform in Germany, little research has considered online lay-reactions to the French reform. Given observations that online interactions differ in many ways to equivalent offline interactions, this study can form a point of contrast to previous studies conducted in offline contexts, thereby enriching the existing literature in this field. It is also often claimed that France is a country in which linguistic purism is deeply entrenched; this article will seek further evidence for these claims.

**Keywords:** #JeSuisCirconflexe; Language Intervention; Metalinguistic discourse; Prescriptivism; Purism; Rectifications de l'orthographe; Rectifications orthographiques; Spelling reform; Twitter

## 1. INTRODUCTION

The *Rectifications orthographiques*<sup>1</sup> of 1990 represents just one initiative in a long line of previous governmental linguistic intervention in French history (Dupriez, 2009: 19). Despite this, in February 2016, the 26-year-old reform made headlines in France and abroad, and was widely discussed on social media websites, when it was announced that from the coming September the spelling changes were to be introduced into school text books (Le Hanaff, 2016). Using tweets collected during this period of, often heated, online discussion, this study examines the reactions on Twitter to the proposed reform and gives an insight into how direct

<sup>1</sup>Also known as *Rectifications de l'orthographe*.

government intervention into the French language is received by the diverse audience of the microblogging site. Twitter was deemed the most appropriate platform for this study as its users are diverse and global (Russell, 2013: 5) and the site's technical setup lends itself to corpus creation. This methodological approach can shed light on immediate reactions to linguistic phenomena, whilst the study, in general, can contribute to the wider context of studies of imposing and maintaining standard languages.

The aims of the spelling *rectifications*, according to the official documentation, were to remove 'anomalies' from French orthography, e.g. changing *combatif* to *combattif*, to align with the two 't's in *combattre* (Académie française, 1990: 15), and to create a simpler spelling system, benefiting children learning to write French for the first time and adults who struggle (1990: 3). Serving also as recommendations for future term creation, particularly in science and technology, both new and old spellings of around 2,000 affected words were to be considered correct for an indeterminate time period in order to aid the transition. The changes, however, were not well received in France, by either the media (Goosse, 1991: 118) or the speech community (Reyes, 2013: 337). Elsewhere in the Francophone world, particularly in Belgium and Switzerland, the *Rectifications* were better received (Ousselin, 2004: 496) and more widely adopted (Groupe RO, 2012: 145).

As Ricento highlights, 'Language-policy debates are always about more than language' (2009: 8). Analysis of discussions of linguistic intervention can therefore reveal much more than simply what the layperson thinks about language. The reform to some seemed to represent a shifting of the goalposts, a simplification that would lead to decreased social capital for those who had already mastered the difficult written language. Johnson similarly found in reactions to the 1996 German reform (2005: 128–129). A recent study found that 73 per cent of native French speakers find the French language difficult and 47 per cent admit to regularly making spelling mistakes (Dargent, 2015). Mastery of the spelling system is strived for in France; the popularity of dictation as a didactic tool and as televised entertainment exemplify this societal celebration of orthographic prowess. At the other end of the spectrum, making spelling errors in France is a cultural faux pas which carries societal consequences, such as reduced potential for social mobility (Paveau and Rosier, 2008: 141). Standard orthography is praised and celebrated in a society where skill and confidence appear to be low, giving increased status to those who do manage to conquer the difficulties of the non-phonetic orthography, and the written standard language more generally. We have, then, an environment where non-standard spellings are common, yet widely condemned and linked to status.

In this chapter, I analyse principally three corpora of tweets which discuss the *Rectifications orthographiques* of 1990, to investigate the reactions of an online audience to the resurfacing of intervention into the spelling system and to what extent these reactions can be considered to be prescriptive and/or purist. To do so, I will first introduce the concepts of standard language ideology and purism, followed by a more in-depth discussion of the *Rectifications orthographiques* of 1990. The next section summarises the study's methodology, including discussions of the use of Twitter and corpus creation. The study will then turn

to an analysis of three corpora of tweets, focusing primarily on reactions to the reform, what is being targeted, be that a specific spelling or a person, and recurring themes.

### 1.1. Standard language and society

A standard language, following Milroy and Milroy's theorization, is a high-prestige variety of a language considered to have the characteristics of maximum efficiency and minimum misunderstanding in communication (1999: 19). The standardisation process 'freezes languages in time' to ensure minimal variation, although some standard languages have been subject to reform over time (Ameka, 2017: 73). The active participation in language planning activities supports the standard's primacy (Lodge, 1993: 236), and makes the pressure to conform high (Paveau and Rosier, 2008: 141); a pressure reinforced by standard language ideology.

Acknowledged as 'a bias toward an abstract, idealized homogeneous language, which is imposed and maintained by dominant institutions and which has as its model the written language' (Lippi-Green, 1997: 64), standard language ideology creates an environment where deviations from the standard are viewed as a cultural faux pas (Paveau and Rosier, 2008: 141) and non-codified languages as 'irregular' and 'primitive' (Joseph, 1987: 129). Standard language ideology, manipulated and supported in France by state and cultural institutions, can lead to a number of further ideologies, such as links between the standard and nationhood, education and upward social mobility (Lodge, 1993: 12). This ideology encourages prescriptive language behaviours and a view that there is one correct way, and in turn many incorrect ways, of using language (Milroy and Milroy, 1999: 44). In looking at discussions of the spelling reform on Twitter, this study will reveal if and how this ideology, and those which accompany it, manifest in the Twittersphere.

## 2. PURISM

Preservation of a language's purity is, according to Coulmas, part of this 'prescriptivist agenda' (2017: 49). Purism, defined by Walsh (2016: 1) as 'a belief that the language of a particular group of speakers is in decline or threatened in some way by foreign borrowings or by internal changes, and that the language therefore needs protection from these undesirable changes', is often considered as 'un trait typiquement français' (Paveau and Rosier, 2008: 37). This is likely due to the work of the *Académie française* and the country's history of linguistic intervention (Walsh, 2016: 2). Moreover, Paveau and Rosier (2008: 73) assert that purist commentary on language is natural and normal: 'chacun de nous est un peu, beaucoup, à la folie, passionnément puriste, particulièrement en ce qui concerne la langue'. If we are all to some extent purist, there may be a wealth of lay purist attitudes displayed on Twitter.

Thomas' (1991) theoretical framework for describing purism, which is the most substantial to date, suggests that purism is motivated largely by non-rational factors, such as aesthetics or nationhood, but that the distinction between rational and non-rational is not a clear-cut binary (1991: 35–36). Rather, motivations are more

complex and may be considered both rational and non-rational. Thomas also distinguishes between two types of purism: internal and external. External purism is 'xenophobic' (connotations of racism from xenophobia not present), targeting foreign elements in language (1991: 81), such as Anglicisms in France (Ricento, 2009: 120). Internal purism is a belief that linguistic change and/or error within French is contaminating the purity of the language, e.g. non-standard spellings, or in this case, the linguistic intervention in the orthographic system. This study focuses on internal, rather than external, purism.

Purist discourse draws upon a number of images to express opinions on language use (Thomas, 1991: 19), which have been widely studied, particularly in the French and German contexts. In Paveau and Rosier's (2008) in-depth study of primarily internal purism in France, it is suggested that French purist discourse draws on the following arguments: aesthetic (*beau/laid*); political (*langue de la liberté*); pseudo-linguistic (*clarté de la langue*); and metaphorical (*langue en bonne santé*) (2008: 57). Thomas' model also includes aesthetics, but in a broader sense, encompassing values such as 'correctness', 'wholeness' and 'pristineness' (1991: 39). It is of note that these arguments focus on the language itself, and not the user, as a point of criticism. Thus far, the purist imagery and arguments used online have not been analysed in detail in the French context.

Walsh (2016), in her comparative study of internal and external purism in France and Quebec, explores purist attitudes at the official, group and individual level in both places. The metalanguage used by language societies and their attitudes is considered but is not examined at the level of individual speakers. The current study focuses on the opinions of individuals in reaction to direct government intervention into the language in a computer-mediated communication (CMC) context.

### 3. THE SPELLING REFORM OF 1990

Attempts to maintain the primacy of Standard French have punctuated the language's history (Bourhis, 1982: 34) and the spelling system has been reformed numerous times (Groupe RO, 2012: 130). In the years leading up to the *Rectifications orthographiques* in 1990, there was a general feeling of acceptance for a moderate reform 'to modernise the spelling of French, without threatening the foundation upon which it is built' (Catach, 1993: 141–142). Both linguists and laypeople were discussing the possibility of a potential reform (Arrivé, 1994: 3); a study published in *L'école libératrice*, claimed that 90 per cent of French teachers backed a simplification of French spelling (Goosse, 1991: 120).

In reaction to the apparent desire for reform, Prime Minister Michel Rocard founded the *Conseil supérieur de la langue française* (CSLF) in 1989, an institution headed by Rocard himself, which united journalists, linguists and writers, amongst others, to work together on a number of *rectifications* to the spelling system (Arrivé, 1994: 5–7). During their first meeting, on 24 October 1989, Rocard presented five areas to be targeted: the use of hyphens, the pluralization of compound words, the circumflex accent, the past participles of reflexive verbs and a number of 'anomalies' (Arrivé, 1994: 5–7). Once achieved,

Rocard and Maurice Druon, as *Secrétaire perpétuel* of the *Académie française* from 1985–1999, approved the corrections (Catach, 1993: 143). The official report was subsequently published in the *Journal officiel de la République française* in December 1990 (Ousselin, 2004: 491).

Despite the positive sentiment demonstrated from the late 1980s (Dupriez, 2009: 20), the *rectifications* were not well received by the media (Goosse, 1991: 118) or the speech community (Reyes, 2013: 337) and were quickly relabelled as a *réforme de l'orthographe* (Arrivé, 1994: 7). This was despite clear attempts in the official documentation to highlight that the changes do not constitute a reform (*Académie française*, 1990: 3), which may be seen as an upheaval of the system. Such resistance is not uncommon (Reyes, 2013: 337) or surprising given the strong cultural tie that the layperson creates between spelling and culture (Goosse, 1991: 119). As Watts explains: 'Les Français plus que tout autre nation associent langue et culture' (1991: 88). Rocard continued to defend the proposed changes, despite the negative reaction, while the *Académie* distanced itself and did not recommend the usage of the new spellings (Arrivé, 1994: 7). Dictionaries began to include the reformed spellings alongside the old spellings and, in April 2007, the Ministry of National Education announced the official recognition of the new spellings in the school system from 2008 (Dupriez, 2009: 23).

In February 2016, discussion of the reform resurfaced when it was announced that from September 2016 the corrected spellings would be used in educational textbooks (Le Hanaff, 2016), leading to widespread discussion on social media. This prompted the *Académie* to publish an online statement, which, despite acknowledging Druon's official approval of the report, declared: 'L'Académie française tient tout d'abord à rappeler qu'elle n'est pas à l'origine de ce qui est désigné sous le nom de « réforme de l'orthographe », dont la presse se fait l'écho depuis quelques jours' (*Académie française*, 2016). On 4 February 2016, the Education Minister, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem (2016) also reacted to the media backlash via her official website, stating that the proposal of changes was outside her remit, but rather that 'ce travail revient à l'Académie française'. This was followed by an interview, published on *Le Figaro's* website, with the current *Secrétaire perpétuel* of the *Académie française*, Hélène Carrère d'Encausse, who claimed that the *Académie* had in fact not approved the reform itself, but rather a limited number of changes to anomalies (Aïssaoui and Corty, 2016). In the face of social media backlash, neither the *Académie* nor the French government were willing to take responsibility for the *Rectifications orthographiques*.

#### 4. METHODOLOGY

Much debate about the spelling reform took place online; this study will focus on the discussions which took place on social networking site Twitter, which 'allows people to communicate with short, 140-character messages<sup>2</sup> that roughly correspond to thoughts or ideas' (Russell, 2013: 7). As well as the ability to write and send one's own tweets, Twitter also has a growing number of other features such as 'retweeting', the sharing of the tweets of others with one's own followers, creating long threads of tweets, and

<sup>2</sup>In November 2017, Twitter increased this character limit to 280.

responding directly to the tweets of others. Hashtags (a word or phrase preceded by a '#') can be used to group together tweets on similar topics. Clicking on a hashtag in Twitter loads all tweets which include that hashtag.

Twitter uses a 'following' relationship model – users can follow any other user with a public account, with no mutual connection necessary (Russell, 2013: 7). This differs from Facebook, where a mutual online connection is often needed (*ibid*). Twitter's relationship model means a variety of communication types are found in a corpus of tweets: tweets intended for the general public; and communications between both friends and strangers. A corpus which contains this variety of communication is undoubtedly rich and potentially very revealing.<sup>3</sup>

Twitter data can be a useful source of data for researchers as, first, it is used by a wide variety of people all over the world (Russell, 2013: 5). However, it is unlikely that it can yield a completely representative corpus of the population, with research suggesting that just 5 per cent of the French population have, and regularly use, a Twitter account and that usage is skewed heavily to under 35s in urban areas (Culture RP, 2013). Furthermore, reliable demographic information is often unavailable on social networking sites, such as Twitter, meaning researchers often cannot know the makeup of users in their sample. These limitations do not negate the utility of Twitter as a corpus tool, but must be considered when using the website for research.

After a quarter of a century of near silence, the spelling reform of 1990 was widely discussed online in February 2016. My analysis of this online activity is based on tweets collected from 4 February 2016 for 48 hours using the hashtag #JeSuisCirconflexe as a search term. This time period covered the immediate reactions to the resurfacing of the reform whilst also allowing time for tweets to be retweeted – shared amongst users. After 48 hours, the number of tweets being sent and retweeted on the topic had begun to subside.

The #JeSuisCirconflexe hashtag is an adaptation of a previously trending hashtag from January 2015, #JeSuisCharlie, used by Twitter users in reaction to the Charlie Hebdo attacks of 7 January 2015 in Paris. The use of the hashtag, originally a slogan used frequently to express political and ideological solidarity, shows Twitter users grouping together for the same cause. The connotations of the hashtag #JeSuisCirconflexe may make the collection of negative opinions of the reform more likely. It is also possible that tweets using this hashtag are more extreme in their imagery and language as the use of the hashtag itself has, arguably, extreme connotations on Twitter – the most recent high profile use of the slogan online having been for the terrorist attack.

The #JeSuisCirconflexe search is supplemented by two exploratory searches for two hours using the search terms *reform orthographe*<sup>4</sup> and *ognon*. Both search terms were being used at a similar frequency to the hashtag and were selected to compliment the main search. The neutral search term *reform orthographe* was

<sup>3</sup>The potential allowed by Twitter, and social media in general, for wide-ranging forms of linguistic study is now well recognized and documented. See, for instance, (Jones *et al.*, 2015), (Georgakopoulou and Spilioti, 2016), (Paveau, 2017) for more comprehensive discussions.

<sup>4</sup>*Reforme*, without the standard acute accent, was used as both spellings with and without the accent were captured with this search term.

**Table 1.** Top ten retweets (#JeSuisCirconflexe)

Number	Tweet	Number of retweets
1	#JeSuisCirconflexe Apparemment en France on aime accompagner les gens dans la médiocrité <a href="https://t.co/eX71v4saZJ">https://t.co/eX71v4saZJ</a>	199
2	Non mais imaginons: "Je suis sûre ta soeur elle va bien" et "je suis sur ta soeur elle va bien" C'est pas pareil. #JeSuisCirconflexe	162
3	Ne pas confondre un homme mûr, et un homme mur. #JeSuisCirconflexe <a href="https://t.co/dR1oMBepFj">https://t.co/dR1oMBepFj</a>	132
4	A lire #JeSuisCirconflexe 😊😊 <a href="https://t.co/lnj7FfGpGB">https://t.co/lnj7FfGpGB</a>	128
5	#JeSuisCirconflexe	99
6	#ReformeOrthographe: simplification, glorification de la médiocrité, nivellement par le bas... #JeSuisCirconflexe <a href="http://bit.ly/2c1xHQ4">http://bit.ly/2c1xHQ4</a>	90
7	Le seul fait de lire le mot "ognon" suffira à nous faire pleurer maintenant. #JeSuisCirconflexe	88
8	#JeSuisCirconflexe #ReformeOrthographe <a href="https://t.co/26UXpmue9Y">https://t.co/26UXpmue9Y</a>	82
9	Dsl les Jérôme, Benoît, Pacôme, etc. C'est dur de perdre une partie de soi si vous avez besoin de soutien n'hésitez pas #JeSuisCirconflexe	67
10	#JeSuisCirconflexe <a href="https://t.co/P2ZN702lB4">https://t.co/P2ZN702lB4</a>	53

used to capture data that might be less partisan than the tweets which used #JeSuisCirconflexe. The reform also proposes the change of the spelling of *oignon* to *ognon*. The search term *ognon* was included to compare reactions to the proposed removal of the circumflex, with reactions to removing a letter.

Over the 48-hour collection period,<sup>5</sup> 4,481 tweets were collected using the search term #JeSuisCirconflexe. Names of users were removed and tweets were given unique identifiers in the following format: JE-0001 (search term – tweet number). Irrelevant tweets were discarded. This included 64 spam tweets (tweets which make use of a popular hashtag to reach wider audiences, but are otherwise off-topic); tweets which use the search term with a different meaning, for instance if a tweet using the term *ognon* was a recipe for soup; and tweets which use the search term in reference to a language other than French: 'SI T'ÉCRIS EN FRANÇAIS BC TA PEUR DE FAIRE UNE FAUTE D'ORTHOGRAPHE EN ANGLAIS'. When it was unclear whether a tweet was relevant or not, the tweet was classified as unclear and again removed from the sample. Over 623 non-French language tweets were also removed; including 248 English-language tweets. This left 3,794 relevant, French-language tweets in the #JeSuisCirconflexe corpus.

Retweets were then manually separated from original material, to avoid duplication and falsification of results. Retweets are mentioned where relevant

<sup>5</sup>Collected from 4/2/2016–6/2/2016.



but, for the most part, the analysis focuses only on original tweets. The sample contained 1,193 original tweets and 2,601 retweets. Table 1 shows the top ten most retweeted tweets during the collection period. Unless otherwise stated, the below analysis refers to the 1,193 original tweets from the *#JeSuisCirconflexe* corpus. The *reforme orthographe* and *ognon* searches were cleaned up in the same way and amounted to 300 and 204 tweets respectively (post-clean up). These tweets were collected during a two-hour period, which coincided with the first two hours of the *#JeSuisCirconflexe* collection (during which time 214 tweets were collected). Tweets from these searches are referred to as RO-0001 and OG-0001.

The spelling and punctuation of all tweets is reproduced as collected. Non-standard language is frequent throughout the sample, but not discussed in depth here. There are features of CMC, such as use of emoticons and for instance, *ne* deletion, which are arguably now standard for the medium, as shown by van Compernelle (2010: 447–448), and as demonstrated throughout this study. Where relevant, these features will be highlighted during the analysis.

## 5. REACTIONS

*#JeSuisCirconflexe* tweets fell into four categories of reaction towards the spelling reform (created post hoc following analysis of the data): negative; informational; hashtag seen as an overreaction; and positive.<sup>6</sup> Neutral tweets which shared a link or information about the reform were classified as informational (79 tweets – 6.6%); e.g. ‘La réforme de l’ #orthographe, résumée en deux points’ (JE-0027). The hashtag seen as an overreaction category includes tweets which criticise other Twitter users for using the hashtag *#JeSuisCirconflexe* (41 tweets – 3.4%); e.g. ‘#JeSuisCirconflexe #JeSuisCharlie vous associez de l’orthographe au drame de Charlie hebdo c’est du grand n’importe quoi’ (JE-0159). The sample by reaction types is shown in Table 2.

The majority of tweets in the sample, 998 (83.7%), display a negative reaction to the reform: e.g. ‘C’est vraiment trop nul cette réforme de l’orthographe #JeSuisCirconflexe’ (JE-0282). Within the negative reactions, an additional emotional response was found in 104 tweets (10.4%) of which shock, anger and sadness were the most prevalent: ‘M...mais je pensais que c’était un hoax!’ (JE-0193); ‘Je suis véritablement INDIGNÉ’ (JE-4476); ‘Ils ont brisé mon coeur’ (JE-1500). These emotional responses may suggest a non-rational response to the reform.

The *#JeSuisCirconflexe* hashtag was critiqued in 22 tweets (1.9%): ‘LE HASHTAG LE PLUS DEBILE DE L’HISTOIRE DE TWITTER !’ (JE-0738); ‘Tous les fdp [fils de putes] qui tweet #JeSuisCirconflexe et qui ont tweeter #JeSuisCharlie l’année dernière nvm [niquez vos mères], j’vous jure vous respecte pas.’ (JE-1080); ‘Y a qd même des gens qui osent utiliser #JeSuisCirconflexe en référence à #JeSuisCharlie’ (JE-4261). The language used in these examples – *débile*, *fdp*, and *osent* – is more aggressive than in other categories of the sample, and this is typical of tweets criticizing the hashtag. The choice of vocabulary expresses the anger felt towards the appropriation of the *#JeSuisCharlie* hashtag for a very different occurrence.

<sup>6</sup>Some tweets which, even with further context, were unclear, will not be discussed.



**Table 2.** Composition of reactions by type (#JeSuisCirconflexe)

Reaction type	No. of instances	% of sample
Negative	998	83.7%
Informational	79	6.6%
Unclear	72	6.0%
Hashtag seen as an overreaction	41	3.4%
Positive	3	0.3%

**Table 3.** Types of reaction towards the reform (all samples, 2 hours)

Reaction type	#JeSuis Circonflexe		Ognon		Reforme orthographe	
	No.	%	No.	%	No.	%
Informational	5	5.6%	7	8.6%	33	19.5%
Positive	0	0%	2	2.5%	7	4.1%
Negative	78	87.6%	68	84.0%	124	73.4%
Hashtag seen as an overreaction	4	4.5%	0	0%	3	1.8%

Of the three tweets (0.3%), which reacted positively,<sup>7</sup> two mention language evolution: ‘Une langue qui n’évolue pas est une langue morte...’ (JE-3510); ‘notre langue évolue !’ (JE-4313). Both users acknowledge that languages change over time, and by using the hashtag #JeSuisCirconflexe, link such natural evolution to the reform. The final positive tweet states ‘Je comprends parfaitement l’utilité de cette réforme de l’orthographe. Il suffit de lire les tweets de votre TL<sup>8</sup> pour comprendre pourquoi’ (JE-1991). This user suggests that non-standard language is not acceptable, even online, and that a reform is both needed and likely to improve the situation. All three positive tweets acknowledge a need for a language to change over time, but provide no explicit support for the changes proposed by the reform.

Table 3 displays the frequency of each reaction type for the two-hour samples of tweets from search terms *ognon*, #JeSuisCirconflexe and *reform orthographe*. Thirty-three tweets (19.5%) using the neutral term *reform orthographe* were informational, in comparison to seven *ognon* tweets (8.6%) and five #JeSuisCirconflexe tweets (5.6%). This is unsurprising given the neutrality of the search term, *reform orthographe*, and

<sup>7</sup>Five English-language tweets (which used the hashtag and were, therefore, collected by the search) expressed a positive reaction to the reform; almost ten times more, proportionally, than the 0.3% of positive French-language tweets using the same hashtag.

<sup>8</sup>Timeline. A *timeline* is a feature of the social networking site Facebook; it is a user’s individual profile and a space where other users can post content to the user.

the neutrality strived for in official information-sharing. Two *ognon* tweets (2.5%) and seven *reform orthographe* tweets (4.1%) displayed positive reactions to the reform; if we look at the *#JeSuisCirconflexe* tweets collected during these two hours, there were no positive reactions. Whether the search term was negatively marked or neutral, negative reactions formed the vast majority of tweets. It is not possible to say, at least with any certainty, whether this seemingly widespread negativity is representative of popular general opinion; first, as there is no guarantee that this sample is representative of the population; and second, it may simply be that those who agree with the reform, or are ambivalent to it, did not tweet on the subject.

## 6. THE OBJECT OF CRITICISM

*#JeSuisCirconflexe* tweets present differing opinions about where responsibility lies for the resurfacing of the reform. The then French President, François Hollande, and current Minister of Education, Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, were the two most blamed figures in the sample. Neither of these politicians was directly involved in the spelling reform, first published in 1990, but, arguably, their positions of power in 2016 mean they are to some extent responsible for its revival and introduction into textbooks from September 2016. The *Académie française* is mentioned much less than the political figures, despite the significant role that the *Académie* played in the spelling reform (Catach, 1993: 143).

*Chômage* was mentioned by 27 of the tweets which referenced Hollande (64.3%): ‘Hollande a voulu alléger les chômage, il l’a fais! Sans accent circonflexe...’ (JE-1573); ‘Fin du chômage et des chômeurs Bravo #Hollande’ (JE-1985); ‘#Hollande a enfin vaincu le #chômage’ (JE-0204). A cartoon by Hervé Baudry, which shows Hollande atop of the word *chômage* with its circumflex in his hands saying: ‘Je vous avais promis, d’alléger le chômage: c’est fait !’, is shared in 18 tweets.<sup>9</sup> The subtext in many of these tweets being that Hollande has bigger issues to resolve than the spelling system, such as unemployment rates: ‘Dites Me @fhollande si au lieu de supprimer accents circonflexes vous pouviez carrément supprimer “chômage” et “impôts”’ (JE-4000). To these users, orthography is a triviality in comparison to other societal problems.

Of the tweets which mention Najat Vallaud-Belkacem, seven directly address her Twitter account, showing a desire to engage the minister in online discussion. One such tweet, JE-0008, shares a *Le Monde* article entitled ‘Non, l’accent circonflexe ne va pas disparaître’;<sup>10</sup> not necessarily indicating support of the reform but at least a wish to share reliable information. Shortly before my collection period, Vallaud-Belkacem labelled the general reaction to the reform as a ‘polémique absurde’ in a tweet that included a link to a *L’Express* article,<sup>11</sup> which similarly called the backlash a ‘manipulation politique’. While this tweet does address

<sup>9</sup><https://www.facebook.com/324409304346512/photos/a.324412124346230.76717.324409304346512/893734424080661/?type=3&theater> [Accessed 23/09/2016].

<sup>10</sup>[http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/02/04/non-l-accent-circonflexe-ne-va-pas-disparaitre\\_4859439\\_4355770.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/02/04/non-l-accent-circonflexe-ne-va-pas-disparaitre_4859439_4355770.html) [Accessed 23/09/2016].

<sup>11</sup>[http://www.lexpress.fr/education/revision-de-l-orthographe-une-manipulation-grossiere\\_1760437.html](http://www.lexpress.fr/education/revision-de-l-orthographe-une-manipulation-grossiere_1760437.html) [Accessed 23/09/2016].

general criticism of the reform, the minister avoids direct engagement with Twitter users.

Governmental priorities were again questioned in tweets directed at Vallaud-Belkacem: ‘Que le gouvernement s’occupe des chômeurs avec accent même sans accent ils seront toujours dans le même cas’ (JE-0722); ‘Simplifier l’orthographe tire la langue vers le bas. Vous n’avez rien d’autre à faire?’ (JE-4212). Unlike in Hollande references, five tweets directly insult Vallaud-Belkacem: ‘NUL NAJAT’ (JE-0722); ‘débarrassons-nous de Najat VB’ (JE-1214); ‘elle est bête la ministre’ (JE-2590). Research commissioned by British newspaper the *Guardian* found that articles written by female contributors receive ‘more abuse and dismissive trolling’ via online comments than articles written by men (Gardiner et al., 2016). The difference in reactions to Hollande and Vallaud-Belkacem may suggest that this phenomenon is present in a wider CMC context.

No tweets which reference the *Académie* are insulting or aggressive, as is the case in tweets about Vallaud-Belkacem. It seems that the institution managed to escape the wrath of the Twitter backlash, despite having, arguably, the greatest involvement. This may be because the *Académie* denounced their involvement in February 2016 via a newspaper interview (Aissaoui and Corty, 2016) or because French-speakers are used to the prescriptive nature of the *Académie*, whereas linguistic intervention by the government is less usual.

## 7. RECURRING THEMES

This section will analyse the recurring themes in the 998 #JeSuisCirconflexe tweets classified as displaying a negative reaction towards the spelling reform of 1990. Where relevant, retweets and tweets from the other two search terms are also discussed. All tweets are reproduced exactly as collected, including non-standard orthography and punctuation.

The circumflex accent is the subject of 128 tweets (12.8%). In 104 tweets, instances where a sentence’s meaning would be affected by the inclusion/exclusion of the accent were quoted: ‘« Être un homme mûr » et « être un homme mur », pas si sûr que ce soit la même chose...!’ (JE-0947); ‘Avant la réforme: “je suis sûr ta mère elle va crier” après “je suis sur ta mère elle va crier”’ (JE-0668). The second, third and fourth most retweeted tweets use examples in the same way: *sur/sûr* (JE-1018 – 162 retweets and JE-0451 – 128 retweets); *mur/mûr* (JE-0042 – 132 retweets). The ninth tweet, JE-0020 (67 retweets), mentions first names which are spelt with circumflex accents and states: ‘C’est dur de perdre une partie de soi’. Highfield (2015: 2715) states that humour is a key factor for the ‘retweetability’ of a tweet; the popularity of these tweets seems to uphold this claim. Table 4 displays all examples cited more than once (excluding retweets).

Of the 20 examples, only four are proposed to change by the spelling reform, while 16 are unaffected. In fact, *jeûne*, *mûr* and *sûr* are explicitly mentioned in the official documentation as words which will not change (1990: 5). Despite this, these three words are among the most commented upon, which again may be because of the comedic value of confusing the homophones: ‘Je suis sûr ta

**Table 4.** Circumflex examples cited in #JeSuisCirconflexe tweets

	Example Used	Number of mentions
Spelling due to change	coût	7
	maître/maîtriser	6
	île	4
	paraître/disparaître	3
No change proposed	sûr	72
	chomage	36
	jeûne	22
	Proper nouns	18
	mûr	15
	être/peut-être	9
	tâche	6
	impôt	3
	même	3
	bête	2
	côte	2
	croître	2
	fête	2
	Gateau	2
	hôtel	2
	pâques	2

soeur elle va bien. Je suis sur ta soeur elle va bien’ (JE-1452); ‘Je vais me faire un petit jeune Je vais me faire un petit jeûne’ (JE-0377); ‘Ne jamais confondre un homme mûr avec un homme mur’ (JE-2725). It is unclear whether Twitter users chose these examples for their humour or because they believed that the circumflex was being removed from these words. Langer, in analysing reactions to the German spelling reform, found that the facts were unimportant. What was important was that language was in danger (2001: 34). This seems to be reflected in the sample. Furthermore, the tweets focus on singular examples, rather than on the principles behind the changes; a tendency also shown in reactions to the German spelling reform (Hohenhaus, 2005: 206).

The future decline of the French language is alluded to in 80 tweets (8.0%): ‘Ça commence par supprimer les accents et ça finira par inscrire “sa va” dans le dico...’ (JE-0142); ‘C’est choquant, on finira à utiliser les émoticônes à la place des lettres’ (JE-1226); ‘2015: Oignon. 2016: Ognon. 2023: Truc qui fait pleurer’ (JE-0578). This theme was also shown in the tweets containing search terms *reform orthographe*

and *ognon* (6 and 12 tweets respectively). Langer and Davies (2011: 1) suggest that this slippery slope metaphor, of progressive changes leading to eventual decline, is a 'recurrent phenomenon' amongst non-linguists, with 'modernising and foreign influences' often cited as the threat. The mention of emoticons (JE-1226) is a clear example of such modernizing influences. The tweets present hypothetical future changes that are often hyperbolic such as *un wazo* for *un oiseau*, *Ojd* for *aujourd'hui* and an extension of the change proposed to *nenuphar* (ph to an f) to the words *pharmacie* (*farmacie*) and *orthographe* (*orthografe*). Reyes similarly found that Spanish speakers were likely to associate spelling reform with language decline (2013: 354). It is unclear whether this negative attitude, although seemingly cross-cultural, is specific to this instance of government intervention or to language change more broadly.

In 76 tweets (7.6%), users suggest that the reform represents an undesirable simplification of the language or its decline into mediocrity: 'Plutôt que de prôner l'excellence, ce gouvernement préfère le nivellement par le bas' (JE-0030); 'Simplification – Glorification de la médiocrité – Nivellement par le bas...' (JE-3455); "'Simplification" de orthographe: RAS LE BOL du culte de la médiocrité et du nivellement par le bas' (JE-1640). This is further shown in the retweets: 'Apparemment en France on aime accompagner les gens dans la médiocrité' (JE-0003 – 199 retweets); '#ReformeOrthographe: simplification, glorification de la médiocrité, nivellement par le bas...' (JE-0006 – 90 retweets). The use of *simplification* mirrors the official report that uses the verb *simplifier* twice (1990: 11, 13) and states that 'une langue simple ou simplifiée à l'extrême est une langue pauvre' (1990: 5). For those who have mastered the complicated spelling system, the social status associated with 'correct' usage of the standard language (Lodge, 1993: 12) and 'correct' spelling (Paveau and Rosier, 2008: 143) is at stake. As Johnson (2005: 129), when looking at the German spelling reform, suggested it is not the lowering of the standard but rather the lowering of its value which concerns commentators.

Seven tweets (0.7%) include variations of the verb *appauvrir*, which echoes Druon's use of *pauvre* in the official documentation outlining the reform<sup>12</sup>: 'un appauvrissement de notre langue' (JE-3668); 'Appauvrir la langue pour que les mauvais ne fassent pas l'effort de s'améliorer, à l'image du pays: médiocre' (JE-1013); 'Comment justifier cette volonté de tout appauvrir?' (JE-3417). Both Druon and the Twitter users use the same rhetoric but from opposing angles. It seems hugely unlikely that this is a deliberate mirroring of official rhetoric as tweets which gave examples of words which will not be changing suggested that Twitter users are not informed on the intricacies of the reform and its official documentation. Rather, concepts such as *simplification* and *appauvrissement* have become classic arguments within metalinguistic discussion; the metaphor of an impoverished language has been used in German purism since at least the seventeenth century (Jones, 1999: 59–60).

The perceived inherent qualities of the French language are praised in 45 tweets (4.5%): 'En gommant l'accent circonflexe, on gomme aussi l'histoire et l'étymologie. La logique de la langue!' (JE-1096); 'défendons la richesse de notre langue' (JE-2930); 'La langue française, chef d'oeuvre de l'humanité, élégante et subtile, fille héritière du

<sup>12</sup>'une langue simple ou simplifiée à l'extrême est une langue pauvre' (*Académie française*, 1990: 5).

latin... Ne la bradons pas !' (JE-0227). A number of recurring purist images are displayed; a link to Latin, for instance, has been salient since the Middle Ages (Catach, 1993: 139) and qualities of logic and richness resemble Paveau and Rosier's pseudo-linguistic arguments (2008: 57). In linguistic terms, no language is inherently more logical or richer than any other language; all such judgements are arbitrary (Joseph, 1987: 4), yet metalinguistic commentary has long included such judgements (Jones, 1999: 121).

Beauty is mentioned in nine tweets: 'Ô beauté de la langue française' (JE-2400); 'il faut préserver notre si belle langue française' (JE-0403). Comments on the beauty of French resemble Thomas' aesthetic purism, a non-rational argument for the purity of a language (1991: 39) and the aesthetic argument which Paveau and Rosier suggest is characteristic of a purist discourse (2008: 57). Beauty is presented as reason enough to protect a language; whether this makes an efficient or usable language is insignificant.

Nostalgia is apparent in 21 tweets (2.1%), which refer to the circumflex accent as *le petit chapeau* or *le chapeau chinois*, echoing presumably how users referred to the accent as children. The French have a special relationship with the circumflex accent which 'symbolise l'orthographe française' (Cerquiglini, 1996: 65) and a similar fondness for the accent was observed in the years following the initial publication of the *Rectifications*: 'Le fait de pouvoir écrire plus facilement et simplement ne justifiait pas l'abandon des signes diacritiques auxquels ils trouvaient un certain charme' (Ousselin, 2004: 492). Four tweets looked back to the seventeenth century and *la langue de Molière* – the French playwright who has become synonymous with the *bon usage* of French: 'laissez nous la belle langue de Molière..!' (JE-0390); 'Une réforme inutile qui fait de cette belle langue française une langue qui perd son symbole: la langue de Molière' (JE-4284); 'Molière doit se retourner dans sa tombe' (JE-4379). Twitter users hark back to a 'golden age' of French language, as is common in prescriptivism (Watts, 2000: 35) and purism (Thomas, 1991: 76). The golden age construct implies that change following a golden age can only be negative (Watts, 2000: 35) and that 'something needs to be done to restore it [the language] to its former glory' (Langer and Davies, 2011: 1). Furthermore, references to Molière, in particular, link the French language to culture and, in turn, the spelling reform becomes an attack on this culture.

Moving from themes to a recurring feature, humour is present throughout this corpus of tweets, particularly in the form of, what could be interpreted as, hyperbolic reactions: 'On s'en ballecouilles de vos oignons de merde la ! C'est mon prénom qu'on va peut être tuer... 😊 😊 #JeSuisCirconflexe' (JE-2026); 'si mon gosse plus tard il écrit oignon à la place de oignon il se prend une tarte dans la gueule' (OG-0081); '2000: bon les jeunes ne respectent plus l'orthographe on va réformer l'enseignement. 2016: ok on laisse tomber on réforme l'orthographe' (RO-0369). This form of humour is a dimension which seems to have been less prominent in the reactions to the reform in 1990. This may be symptomatic of the medium; humour seems to be an important feature on Twitter and the restricted character limit of tweets lends itself effectively to punch lines (Molyneux, 2015: 929), or may reflect a changing perspective on the reactions.

## 8. CONCLUSION

The *Rectifications orthographiques*, published in 1990, were presented officially as moderate and acceptable to all. However, the media, followed by Twitter users, quickly dubbed the *rectifications* a reform,<sup>13</sup> immediately radicalizing the proposal, and negative reactions to the reform certainly prevailed in the corpora analysed here. The data seem to support Langer's (2001: 34) claim that laypeople object to spelling reform outright as they believe change is bad, but rarely reflect on the principles of the reform; as evidenced, for instance, by users' outrage at words losing their circumflex accents even when no change was planned. Given that language planning and intervention relies on the support of users of the language (Ricento, 2009: 9), this seems to have negative implications for the uptake of the new orthographies.

Tropes seen in metalanguage since the sixteenth century, such as the beauty, clarity and logic of the French language, (Jones, 1999: 121) still appear pervasive, particularly when the language is felt to be under threat. The more extreme imagery and language present in tweets are seemingly a more recent addition to written discussions of language; they are evidence perhaps for suggestions of increased online disinhibition (Casale et al., 2015: 170). Measured against Thomas' categories of rational and non-rational purist arguments (1991: 37), the tweets analysed generally made non-rational assertions against the reform, with aesthetic arguments amongst the most used. Johnson argues that complaints against a reform cannot be disregarded simply as a 'case of linguistic purism', but that they are a form of bourgeois public debate against 'absolutist forms of authority exercised on the part of the state' (2005: 130). Moreover, in the context of a spelling reform, a desire to maintain the status quo, that is to say the current orthography, is not irrational, even if aesthetically motivated. French speakers adopting the reformed spelling system will have to learn the new orthography, which takes time and effort; time and effort which could be saved by keeping the existing system. The reform will benefit children learning the French orthography for the first time, but for the Twitter users passing comment in this sample, it represents an overhaul of existing knowledge. It would seem rather reductive, then, to classify the reactions as wholly non-rational for their use of an aesthetic argument.

The samples used in this study are proportionally small in comparison to the amount of Twitter data sent daily. In future work, a larger corpus would make it possible also to incorporate geographic and demographic variables, potentially using the geographic information to construct a comparative study between reactions in, for instance, France and Quebec. Equally, a study which compared more comprehensively these online reactions to those displayed in 1990, when the reform was first published, could prove interesting; how much, if at all, have opinions towards the reform changed? Despite the limitations of the current study, it demonstrates the value of using Twitter to study the reactions of users to the re-emergence of a spelling reform, showing that sociolinguistically interesting discussions of governmental language intervention are happening online.

<sup>13</sup>See, for instance: [http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/02/04/non-l-accent-circonflexe-ne-pas-disparaitre\\_4859439\\_4355770.html](http://www.lemonde.fr/les-decodeurs/article/2016/02/04/non-l-accent-circonflexe-ne-pas-disparaitre_4859439_4355770.html) (Accessed 20/11/2017); <http://www.lefigaro.fr/actualite-france/2016/02/04/01016-20160204ARTFIG00080-la-reforme-de-l-orthographe-de-1990-fait-son-entree-dans-les-manuels-de8230-2016.php> (Accessed 20/11/2017).



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