I. Introduction

The first half of the 17th century was a period of change in which gender and language influenced each other in a particular way. Starting with an overview on some major developments from the year 1600 on, I would like to discuss three theses concerning the interaction between gender and language in Early Modern France. In the centre of interest will be questions concerning women’s influence on linguistic debates and new practices of language; as well as new forms of social participation and exclusion based on language factors.

II. Major developments from 1600 on

The year 1600 marked the end of the Renaissance and the beginning of the classical era in France. It can be considered a historical turning point from several aspects:

1. On the political level, King Henry IV married the Italian Mary de Medici in 1600 and settled with his court in Paris. The year after, the infant Louis XIII was born. A new era of political stability began, as the religious wars inside the country were banished and the question of the succession to the throne was solved. When Louis XIII was old enough to reign on his own, he led a long fight for power against his mother, which led to the nomination of the Cardinal de Richelieu as Prime minister in 1624 and a centralisation of state power in the hands of the king and his prime minister.

2. On the level of language, Latin started to lose its prestige and universal usage, whereas French gained increasing influence as a written language in science and literature. The debate about how standardised written and spoken French should look like had been going on for almost a century, when the poet François de Malherbe arrived in Paris in the year 1605. With his ideas about modern French language, a literary revolution began which would later be known as the struggle between ancients and moderns. Malherbe fought against the literary tradition of the Renaissance, which was characterised by an important influence of the Antiquity, by a particular measure of the verses in poetry, by the abundance of words and expressions coming from different social environments and cultural origins. His fierce defence of a new, purified language resulted in completely new esthetical standards for poetic and spoken language. Still, he was disputed by a good number of contemporary writers, like for example Marie de Gournay, who defended amongst elements, the great variety of vocabulary that existed in French until then. But her point of view was considered to be old-fashioned and she lost her battle.
3. On the **scientific** level, a new kind of thinking was born with René Descartes. He published his *Discours de la méthode* 1637 in French language instead of Latin, as it was customary for academic treatises at that time. Henceforth, science and thinking were grounded on reason and proof. Descartes split up the sciences into natural sciences, perceptible by the senses, on one side; and philosophy on the other side, only perceptible by the spirit. In this new philosophical approach, spirit was considered genderless. This point was particularly important for women, as it legitimated their participation in scientific debates. Moreover, more and more scientific works were written in French language, which made them accessible to a larger part of the population, until then excluded from higher education – like the vast majority of women from all social classes.

4. In the **social and cultural** field, the artistic life became particularly rich around the court, but also in private circles in town. New groups outside the traditional, Latin-speaking universities emerged, where people discussed scientific, literary and philosophical matters. They met either in so called “academies”, frequented only by men; or in mixed-sexed circles, which we know today under the name “salons”. The latter were hosted by cultivated, mostly self-instructed, women, who invited several times a week a carefully chosen society. Women and men, noble people and bourgeois, writers and thinkers met in their houses and under their rule of politeness. These gatherings were actually trend setting for fashions of all kind, like good manners, artistic taste and, last but not least, the most sophisticated way to speak French.

Now, within this framework, what did these new developments mean for women and which role did they play? In how far did language matters and gender relationships influence each other?

**I would like to present three theses:**

1. The increasing importance of French language in the scientific and literary field offered new possibilities of social participation for women.

2. This increasing influence of women in formerly male dominated spheres led to a re-conquest of power by the control of language and language institutions.

3. The gender-and-language-order established during the 17\textsuperscript{th} century is still perceptible in today’s French society.

**III. In how far women were able to increase their participation in social and cultural life via their language capacities?**

Traditionally, women received little education in general; and very rarely they were taught Latin or Greek, even in the ranks of the noble or upper bourgeois class. Yet, these ancient languages were the indispensable basis for higher education during the Middle Ages and the Renaissance as academic books were written in Latin and therefore teaching took place in Latin. Some women learned Latin and Greek as autodidacts, like the writer and philosopher Marie de Gournay, but they were exceptions. Too much knowledge was in fact considered contra-productive for a girl’s marriage opportunities,
as intellectual activity was considered incompatible with the nature of the female sex. So when modern thinkers like Descartes started to write in French, women got the opportunity to read contemporary works. And indeed, many women started to instruct themselves, by individual reading and learning as well as by attending conferences (if they were admitted) or through conferences specially organised for a female public. At the same time, women created own circles in which they discussed current topics of artistic, philosophical or scientific interest. Political and religious issues were, however taboo, and engaged Protestants, like Madame Des Loges, who held a very popular salon of high cultural level in the years 1615-1629, had to close it and leave Paris definitely on command of the highest political authorities.

This new participation of women in the intellectual life was accompanied by two contemporary ideas, one of which was very favourable to women and the other one very unfavourable. The favourable one was that women spoke French better than men were able to do. As women had been largely excluded from education, they had little knowledge of foreign languages. So their French was considered „pure“, which meant lacking foreign, and mainly Latin, words and grammatical constructions. Their way of speaking was considered free from academic heaviness and, on the contrary, characterised by a natural, female elegance.

This was a precious capital in a moment of history, when France was striving for cultural and political predominance on the European continent. As the Renaissance had started much earlier in Italy than in France, Italian culture and language had been very influent all over Europe, and particularly in France during the 16th century. The risk was in fact that Italian would succeed Latin as the universal language of Science, Culture and International Relations. So, at the beginning of the 17th century, when French nationalism and centralism grew, French leaders were urging to make French the dominant language in Europe. Therefore, French language had to become coherent in its spelling and structures, and pure from other cultural influences. So who could know better how true, original French should sound if not the ladies who had little or no education in other languages?

The unfavourable condition for women’s intellectual deployment was that it was very badly considered for a woman to have a profound and serious education. Above all, Writing was considered particularly unfitting for a lady, and especially for a noble woman. This meant that women either had to take into account to be socially marginalised – which meant, amongst other inconveniences (if it is one), to remain unmarried - or to hide their knowledge and skills. Under these circumstances, two main forms of female understatement developed particularly well: salon conversation, and letter writing.

Let me give you two examples:

The person known for having brought to perfection salon conversation is Catherine de Rambouillet. In her palace in the centre of Paris she held receptions almost every day, from 1613-1648. The best-known poets of her time came to read their works in her salon and accepted her and her guest’s critic before they would publish or perform their poems or theatre plays. The salon of Madame de Rambouillet gave women the possibility to obtain and to exchange knowledge in a socially acceptable way. They
would comment mainly men’s works and never expose their own knowledge overtly. They mantled their intellectual contributions in discreet and cheerful behaviour, and were therefore intangible. Their dominance appeared on the level of style, it consisted in their way to speak and to behave. In that field, their competence was so unanimously recognised that young nobles were sent to their assemblies before they were admitted to court, in order to acquire good manners and the necessary level of culture.

A second example for major cultural contribution in a veiled, typically female way is Marie de Sévigné. She was a young, noble widow who lived most of the time in her castle in Normandy. When her daughter moved to the South of France after her marriage in 1669, Marie de Sévigné wrote her 3 or 4 letters every week throughout almost 30 years. Not the whole correspondence is conserved, but far over thousand letters remain. Her style of writing is unanimously recognised as particularly beautiful and witty, and belongs to the canon of French national literature. Madame de Sévigné, though, wrote mainly about everyday life, like the people she met, the news she got from Paris, problems concerning the administration of her goods, her own or her daughter’s health. She would never have dared to pretend to be a professional writer or to publish novels, as she was afraid to bring prejudice to her good reputation.

IV. Which were the limits to female participation in cultural life?

These two examples show the ambiguity of women’s opportunities to be cultural actors. And indeed, despite the extreme popularity of women-centred salon life during the whole 17th century, the limits to female recognition in the sphere of culture and science appeared rather quickly. They concerned mainly three areas:

1. Where language became of political interest.
2. Where women transgressed openly the border to academic life.
3. Where serious recognition of authorship was at stake.

Let me give you some examples:

1. In the year 1635, the government realised that language was an important political factor and proposed the foundation of a central academy in which all matters of literary and linguistic concern were to be discussed. Cardinal de Richelieu proposed to a group of leading writers to become the founding members of the Académie Française. They initially hesitated to give up their independence, but official recognition, prestige and material advantages were convincing arguments to join the new institution. Although several of them had met regularly at Marie de Gournay’s home in order to discuss linguistic questions with her, none of them put forward that she should be part of the assembly although she had published several treatises on French language and was a renowned translator from Latin and Greek. The same was the case for Madeleine de Scudéry, one of the most famous writers of the 17th century. Her novels were widely read at her time and translated in many languages. She received prestigious literary awards but was never admitted as a member of the Academy. From the very beginnings, it was an unwritten law that women would not be nominated to this supreme language authority, however successful or popular their works might be. This did not change until 350 years later, when in 1981 Marguerite de Yourcenar became its first female member.
Until today, the prestigious Academy has not known more than five female members in total.

2. In the year 1638, Charlotte d’Auchy, one of the first salon hostesses, announced the foundation of an academy under her direction. Furthermore, she wrote a scholarly comment on a religious text. Both her project of an academy as her essay were immediately ridiculed, as she had tried to participate in a domain reserved to men.

A tough stroke against women’s identity as cultivated human beings, were also Molière’s extremely popular comedies. When the play “The learned ladies – Les femmes savantes” were performed in 1672 for the first time, it ridiculed women striving for knowledge and had a very discouraging effect on women to assume their education.

V. In how far do 17th century rules of language continue to have an impact on today’s gender relations in France?

In the second half of the 17th century, the language authority of the salons diminished gradually and shifted to purely male institutions like the Académie Française. Still, literature was not exclusively a men’s business. The 17th century would become famous for female writers like Madeleine de Scudéry or Marie-Madelaine de La Fayette. The latter published in 1678 – anonymously - “The princess of Cleves – La Princesse de Clèves”, today known as the first modern novel. But towards the 18th century, writing and language became male territories and novels written by women disappeared from the academic canon for a long time.

So on the one hand we can say that today’s French is the result of a fruitful and cultivated dialogue of both sexes in the joyful atmosphere of the salons in the first half of the 17th century, and has therefore a rather positive gender rating. But on the other hand, we also inherited an important language rule, which establishes a clear gender hierarchy in and by a language, which is very unfavourable for women. One of the first acts of the newly founded Académie Française was in fact to ask one of its members, to write down the rules of the modern language and its philosophy. When Claude Favre de Vaugelas published in 1647 his “Remarques sur la langue française”, it was not a traditional grammar but a collection of guidelines for the right usage of French language, inspired mainly by Malherbe and the salon ladies. One central doctrine is nevertheless, that “the masculine gender is the more noble one and has to dominate when the female and the masculine gender stand next to each other”. Or, in the French original: “le genre masculin estant plus noble, il doit prédominer toutes les fois que le masculin et le féminin se trouvent ensemble.” In practice, this rule is applied each time when the plural of nouns or adjectives referring to both genders is formed by the plural in the masculine form. This rule – which did not exist before - was particularly criticised for its symbolic content during a large public debate on gender equality in the 1980s and 1990s. As a result, the French government passed a decree on the Feminisation of occupational titles in 1999. This measure has led to an increasing usage of the female term, when a profession or a public charge exercised by a woman, are to be denominated. I think we can consider this as a first step towards gender equality in French language after several centuries of women’s marginalisation.