



The Religious Sign from a Semiotic Perspective a Social-Semiotic Interpretation of the Challenges Presented by the Concept of Religious Sign in the Context of French Schools

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Accepted: 13 November 2023
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Abstract

This essay explores the intricate challenges surrounding the concept of religious signs in the context of secular French schools through a social-semiotic lens, drawing inspiration from Michael Halliday's Systemic-Functional Linguistics. It delves into the interplay of language and society, shedding light on three crucial metafunctions: ideational, interpersonal, and textual. The ideational function investigates how religious signs serve as semiotic tools for representing the world and interpreting human experiences. The interpersonal function helps to examine how these signs foster reaction among diverse groups within the school community. Furthermore, the essay scrutinizes the textual function's role in weaving these two functions into coherent discourse, enabling (or not) effective communication. Through an examination of these linguistic components, this essay unravels the complexities of navigating religious signs in French schools, providing insights into the broader socio-cultural dynamics and challenges faced in reconciling diverse religious perspectives with a secular educational system.

Keywords Systemic-functional linguistics · French schools · Religion · Laicity

1 Introduction

Historically governed by a monarchy by divine right, France now stands as one of the countries that most firmly asserts the separation of Church and State, as well as the neutrality of its governance towards religions. This neutrality is legally established by a law dated December 9, 1905, regarded as the foundational document of laicity in France. As a result, it entails respect for all beliefs, the recognition of each

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individual's freedom to practice the religion of their choosing, the equality of all citizens before the law regardless of religion, and the absence of an official state religion and state-funded clergy [11]. Implicitly, the law also contains the idea that religious practice should largely remain within the realm of the private [47]. This does not imply that religious symbols are prohibited in public sphere. In fact, some mayors who, at the time when the law came into effect, had attempted to ban the cassock and cornette in public, were reminded that individuals have the right to dress as they please in public spaces, as long as they adhere to the rules of modesty [8].

In principle, laicity is an ideal whose uniqueness lies in its ability to allow both believers and atheists to live together without neither group being stigmatized [63]. According to Catherine Kintzler, philosopher and author of *Penser la laïcité* [45], the origin of the concept dates back to the French Revolution and the fundamental opposition between the conception advocated by Locke which excludes atheists from political association, and that defended by Condorcet based on the idea that the law does not resort to the model of faith, it draws no inspiration from any pre-existing bond, and assumes no form of prior belief or affiliation. It conceives a neutral space as a condition for the possibility of political association.

This so-called *laïcité à la française*, French idiosyncratic form of secularism, has found a particularly fertile ground for expression within the educational system [70]. France has a highly centralized system, with public schools that have been secular for more than a century, alongside private institutions that are often denominational and mostly benefit from an association agreement with the French State. This private education sector comprises approximately 12,500 establishments, catering to around 2,200,000 students, accounting for 17% of the total enrolled student population. Private education is primarily administered by the Catholic educational sector, which accounts for 85% of private schools at the primary and secondary levels. The remaining private institutions are largely non-denominational, although there are also approximately 300 Jewish-affiliated private schools, and around thirty private Muslim-affiliated establishments [29].

The public education system is bound by the principle of religious neutrality, a rule that was first established, even before 1905, by a law inspired by the Minister of Public Instruction Jules Ferry, who, in addition to being a politician, was a philosopher and advocate of secularism [61]. This law, dating back to 1882 appears as the initial step leading up to the 1905 law on the separation of Churches and State. The principle of laicity, which applies to students as well as to the teaching staff and administrators, does not appear to have posed any issues for a long time.

The first significant instance concerned the question of whether the wearing of a garment could be deemed a religious symbol and whether such practice was at odds with secularism, arose in 1989, in a junior high school in Creil, North of Paris [53]. The Gabriel-Havez school was attended by students of 25 different nationalities, with almost two thirds being Muslim. The principal prohibited three students of Maghrebi origin who were donning an Islamic veil from attending school, asserting that their attire did not align with the principle of secularism upheld in the institution's guidelines. The incident, reported in the press, ignited a rather heated societal debate that culminated in a demonstration in Paris advocating for the right to wear the veil. Following this, the Minister of Education, Lionel Jospin, petitioned the

State Council, *Conseil d'Etat*, the highest administrative court in France, which also serves an advisory role to the executive power, to give an opinion on the matter. The Council declared that the display of religious symbols did not contravene the principle of laicity, as it was an exercise of freedom of expression [20]. The minister, however, subsequently conveyed his disagreement with the viewpoint of the Council, which justified the school in forbidding its students from donning religious signs. Given the situation, the parents of the students initiated legal proceedings, which ultimately concluded unfavorably for them. The Administrative Court referred to the Law on education, which at that time stipulated that “in respect for the principles of equality, freedom and secularism, the State guarantees the exercise of the right to education and training of all pupils living on the national territory, whatever their social, cultural or geographical origin” [32].

Following several other less publicized cases, the French state opted to provide what was presented as legal clarity through the *Loi sur les signes religieux à l'école*, which was voted on March 15, 2004. The text prohibits, within public primary, middle, and high schools, the sporting of signs or clothing through which students openly demonstrate religious affiliation. These restrictions also apply to the teachers and administrative staff employed by the school [54]. The law does not apply to universities, including public ones, where students remain free to wear attire of their choice. The 2004 law refrains from listing the “signs” and “clothing” prohibited in educational institutions, but its circular of implementation gives the following examples: Islamic headscarves, Jewish kippahs, and large Christian crosses. The decree also specifies that it does not undermine the students’ right to wear “discreet” religious symbols [15].

The laws aim to ensure the neutrality of public schools and to guarantee equality among all pupils and freedom of thought, irrespective of their religious beliefs or affiliations. It also mentions equality between men and women. The school has become the place where the duality of *laïcité* finds its most tangible expression. Indeed, a student who removes their religious symbols upon entering a public school and then puts them back on upon leaving, experiences the fact that anything associated with school should refrain from involvement in matters of belief and disbelief, but everywhere else, including the public space, freedom of (religious) expression is/should be the norm. Nevertheless, while the legislative framework appears relatively clear, nothing is definitively resolved, and violations of secularism continue to rise within French schools, where the resourcefulness of pupils appears boundless when it comes to devising means to circumvent the law.

2 The Religious Phenomenon in French Schools

Despite the principle of neutrality, it must be noted that the religious phenomenon in education is not overlooked by French law. Article L. 141–3 of the Education Code, stemming from the Jules Ferry Law of 1882, stipulates that elementary schools are vacant one day per week in addition to Sunday, in order to enable parents to provide their children with religious instruction, if they so wish, outside of school premises [17]. At the secondary level, if an institution has no boarding

facilities, the establishment of chaplaincy services are discretionary.¹ However, chaplaincy services may be established if requested by parents of students. The decision is made by the regional academy's director after reviewing the application submitted by the school principal. Religious instruction is offered outside of class hours and, in principle, outside the school premises. It may exceptionally be provided within the school premises if the safety or health of the students warrants it, with the authorization of the regional academy's director, following the school principal's advice. Regarding institutions with boarding facilities, the establishment of chaplaincy services is a right upon request from families. In this case, religious instruction is conducted within the school premises (Articles R. 141-2 and R. 141-3 of the Education Code). In both scenarios, the chaplains are submitted for approval to the regional academy's director by religious authorities. In institutions without chaplaincy services, religious education is left to the discretion of families. Yet, in secondary schools, principals must, before establishing the schedule of the school week, engage with the competent religious authorities to ensure families desiring it can provide their children with religious instruction of their choice [14, 17].

Religious worship is present within the French school system, yet it must remain confined to specific spaces and designated times allocated for such purposes. Beyond these designated spaces, neutrality should ideally be upheld, and religion should remain discreet. This is not always the case, as violations of the principle of secularism have become an issue in recent years, with an average of about 300 reports filed every month by teachers in French middle or high schools. March 2023 even saw a peak with about 500 reported violations [49], and the number of reports has increased by 120% in 2023 compared to the preceding year [46]. In spite of this amplification, the phenomenon remains marginal compared to the 12,737,900 students in the French school system.

The wearing of a religious symbol is also the most frequent reason for reporting violations of secularism since it represents 39% of the cases identified, as can be seen on the graph below published by the Ministry of Education [49] (Fig. 1).

The incidents are presented as percentages of recorded incidents in November 2022, and are based on subjective responses provided by teachers or administrative staff in schools. The represented categories are those listed on the incident report forms available to teachers and school principals, and it's evident that the proposed alternatives are somewhat vague and could overlap. Thus, in the presence of a student displaying a religious sign, a teacher might certainly select the box designated for this category, but could they choose the one reserved for "suspicion of proselytism", or the one for "refusal of republican values", or even the one for "community claims"? The answers to these questions depend on how the act of wearing a religious symbol is interpreted, and this interpretation, in turn, depends on the function of the symbol.

To analyze a phenomenon based on its function, the tools offered by systemic-functional linguistics seem appropriate and will help us create a comprehensive framework for this study, without excluding the use of other theories when

¹ Note that the term "chaplaincy" is used here in its broadest sense, as it can refer, for example, to Christian Chaplaincy, Islamic Chaplaincy, Jewish Chaplaincy, and so forth.

Incidents related to secularism in schools

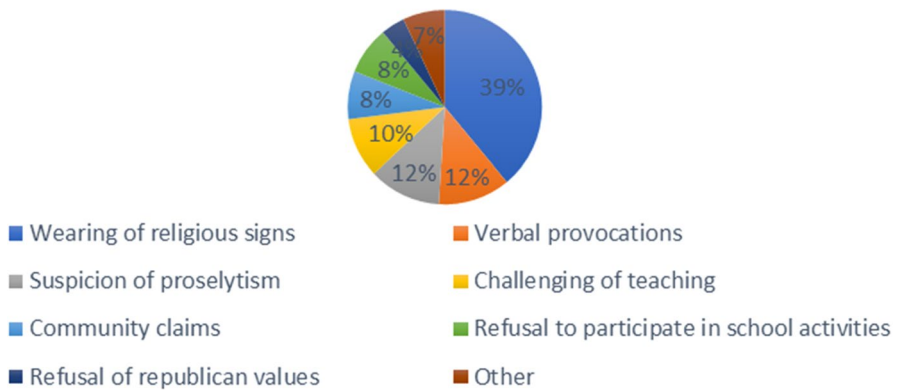


Fig. 1 Incidents related to secularism in schools

necessary. We hope, in this way, to shed light on the act of wearing a religious symbol at school, given the ongoing controversies surrounding the concept of secularism in France.

3 Theoretical Framework: Systemic-Functional Linguistics

The socio-semiotic school of systemic-functional linguistics is a school of linguistics originally developed by the British linguist Michael Halliday [36–38]. It regards language as a set of sememes at the disposal of speakers to articulate themselves and, more specifically, to convey meaning within a social context. It seems particularly suitable as a theoretical background because it is a school that emphasizes “the relationship between language and social structure” [38: p.10] and unlike other linguistic theories, it has from its onset, sought out to be an “applied linguistics”, or “a kind of linguistics where theory is designed to have the potential to be applied to solve problems that arise in communities around the world, involving both reflection and action” [57]. Moreover, it is a theory that has the ability to address issues that lie outside linguistics itself, as meaning can be conveyed through codes other than language. “This ability is related to the different disciplinary currents that have informed and become part of SFL [systemic functional linguistics], including anthropology, anthropological linguistics, sociology, educational theory, neuroscience, computational linguistics, and AI. Thus, SFL has always been developed in dialogue with other disciplines” [57].

By adopting this approach, we will consider the display of a religious sign as a semiotic system in the sense of a systemic resource for meaning, where the notion of function is fundamental for the evaluation of the system. Systems can be viewed as divergent options in value, where the distinctions do not encompass the entirety of

the form or value, but rather constitute elements thereof. In this conceptualization of *system*, we view the code (regardless of its form) as an array of alternative choices.

As for the functions, Halliday identified three metafunctions or semantic components/meanings which are crucial for the success of the communication process. The first is the ideational function, which is the function of representing the world, of interpreting human experience. The second is the interpersonal function, which is the function of interacting with other people, and the third is the textual function, which is the function of creating coherent speech, a function that enables the two first functions/meanings to come together in coherent text.

It should also be mentioned that the functional systemic linguistic perspective rejects the idea of neutrality of the discourse: a discourse always has an effect, but to discover its nature it is necessary to be interested in the evaluative position encoded in the message and the resources implemented to provoke a certain attitude in the receiver. But before studying the attitude of the receiver, we must take an interest in the attitude of the transmitter which we will do through the ideational function of the sign.

4 Ideational Metafunction of the Religious Sign

We will analyze the ideational metafunction by turning our attention to the manner by which those who display a religious symbol represent the world, how *they* make sense of reality.

Halliday distinguishes two sub-metafunctions within the ideational. The logical metafunction pertains to the grammatical resources employed in constructing grammatical units into more intricate structures. Applied to the domain at hand, we propose that it refers to the various symbols utilized to signify one's religion (such as a cross, a veil, a kippah, a turban, and so forth). The experiential function pertains to the grammatical means employed in representing one's lived experiences. In our case, it would be the signification given to the religious sign by those wearing it. The ideational metafunction exemplifies the contextual significance of the *field*, namely, the form/nature of the social process [36]. This function is here studied from the perspective of the sender.

4.1 Logical Metafunction of the Ideational

The observation of schools shows that most frequently the resource in play in order to signify is a type of veil worn by Muslim girls and hiding their hair. It has different names but is mostly known as hijab and is worn by women and girls in the presence of men outside their immediate family. Two other outfits of Arab inspiration have recently emerged in school, when boys have started wearing qamis and girls, abayas. The qamis is generally a long tunic that reaches above the ankles. Deeply rooted in Arab culture and varying across regions, the qamis, however, is not strictly speaking a Muslim garment, but rather a traditional Arab attire that predates Islam [39]. The abaya is a traditional garment worn by women, consisting of a long, loose, and

covering robe. It is primarily worn in Arab countries, especially in the Persian Gulf, as well as the Maghreb region. These garments are now part of the attire prohibited at schools, as announced by Gabriel Attal, Minister of National Education, on August 27, 2023 [6].

Another example of religious sign is the *dastar* or turban worn by the Sikh community and a certain number of Sikh pupils were expelled from school for refusing to remove it. The turban serves the purpose of holding the long hair of a Sikh, which they never cut, following the *Kesh* rule, as a mark of respect for God's perfect creation. It contains the *kangha*, a wooden comb symbolizing the Sikh's care for their hair [12].

Other religious symbols that may be encountered in French schools are Jewish kippahs or Christian crosses, which are also prohibited if they are too conspicuous. However, these occurrences are very rare and do not appear in the statistics of the Ministry of National Education. Two reasons are undoubtedly the cause of this. The first one concerns the fact that western Christianity has lost the habit of externalizing their faith, progressively abandoning its rituals and symbols (partly under the influence of the Reformation) or confining them within churches. As for Jews of traditional obedience, they are often enrolled in private religious institutions. It is, however, not impossible that we may witness cases of Christian veiling in the future, a phenomenon that, although marginal, appears to be on the rise in the United States, particularly among young millennial Americans [13].

4.2 Experiential Metafunction of the Ideational

Objectively, the experiential subfunction of these signs is to represent a world where a person dresses in a certain manner. But this objective observation does not yield any insights, inasmuch as the ideational function is primarily subjective. Ideally, for a comprehensive analysis of the experiential function, it would be necessary to conduct individual interviews with each person regarding their worldview. In fact, rather than merely perceiving a veiled young girl (or a turban-wearing boy), systemic functional linguistics suggests delving deeper into the semantic significance of each act. This is, of course, unfeasible. However, several studies have been conducted, particularly among young Muslim women/girls wearing a hijab, which can provide us with information on this function, and focus on the manner people take their place in the world. [44, 53, 59]. The observation of the responses collected shows of a conglomerate of semiotic meanings or choices (for Halliday, all acts of communication involve choices), which we have grouped around a few ways of seeing the world.

4.2.1 A World Where Religion is Visible and Respected

Most of the young women/girls interviewed express their intention to follow the rules of their religion. "For [these] Muslim believers, Islam is not simply a set of commandments based on religious belief as in western secular thought, but a way to live and inhabit the world, bodily and ethically" [3]. These girls adhere to the prescriptions of the Quran, i.e. the Surah 33, verse 59, which reads "O Prophet! Tell

your wives, your daughters, and the believers' women to lengthen their clothes. In this way, they'll be recognized and won't be harassed. God is Forgiving and Caring.”; and the Surah 24, verse 31: “Tell believing women to restrain their looks, and to guard their privates, and not display their beauty except what's usually showing, and to cover their breasts, and not to expose their beauty except to their husbands, their fathers, their fathers-in-law, their sons, their stepsons, their brothers, their brothers' sons, their sisters' sons, their fellow women, what their right hands have, their male servants who are free of sexual desires, and children who are indifferent to women's nudity. And they must not stomp their feet to draw attention to their hidden beauty. Believers! Turn to God, all of you, so that you may succeed” [64].

These texts receive numerous interpretations based on varying conceptions of the religion. At times, they are interpreted in a literal and traditional manner, prescribing the wearing of a physical veil; alternatively, they are understood to refer to the veil as something immaterial. This latter interpretation, often adopted by the Sufis, is frequently termed “interpretationist”, and is viewing the texts as simply a means to remind women and young girls of the significance of sartorial modesty [69].

As a matter of fact, the use of the Islamic veil, still remains the subject of debate in terms of obligation vs possibility, as the Quran does not prescribe explicitly and in an unequivocal manner that Muslim women *must* cover their heads and necks, let alone wearing a full-face veil.

4.2.2 A World Mindful of Culture and Traditions

A majority of teenage girls who claim to wear the veil for religious reasons, also name respect for cultural and family traditions. These young girls have seen their grandmothers, mothers, or older sisters wear the veil and follow the tradition that has been established in the family. This is a well-known attitude among sociologists, which they often refer to as *imitation*.

The concept of imitation is particularly important in Gabriel De Tarde's sociological theory because it highlights the role of social influence and the spread of behaviors, ideas, and customs within a society. Tarde believed that imitation is a fundamental social process through which individuals learn and adopt new behaviors, beliefs, and cultural practices. According to him, imitation is at the core of all social life and explains both human relationships and history [27]. Imitation can be conscious and unconscious but finds its origin in the child's initial imitation of their parent.² It depends on authority and occurs naturally, due to the nature of the child's mind. As Tarde pointed out: “If traditional affirmations are accepted, I will not say more freely, but more quickly and vigorously, by the mind of the child, and are imposed upon it through authority, not through persuasion, it means that the mind of the child was a *tabula rasa* when the dogmas came into it, and that to be received they had neither to confirm nor contradict any idea that was already established there.” [28: p. 245–246].

² “The father is, especially at first, the infallible oracle and sovereign ruler of his child; and for this reason he is his child's highest model” [28: p. 199].

It is therefore not surprising that parental authority takes precedence over that of the school, given that students bring with them a cultural heritage acquired within their familial and societal contexts since birth. This trend also signifies a diminishing acceptance of teachers as authoritative figures. If pupils tend to imitate their parents or siblings more than the school, it suggests a potential erosion of the school and teachers' authority in France. This decline in authority could be one of the factors contributing to the challenges in maintaining the republican idea of secularism.

Another factor that may be important is the fact that these young people often come from immigrant backgrounds, and as such may experience a loss of references. It is therefore not surprising that they seek to find reference points and to acquire what Bourdieu calls "symbolic capital" from two different sources, religious and cultural [10].

4.2.3 A World Where One is Part of a Community of Peers

Furthermore, wearing the veil can also denote a desire to visually belong to a community with other teenagers in the same situation, create visible connections among coreligionists. This is a particularly strong argument in adolescence, where the desire to belong to a group is very powerful [55]. This sense of community is undoubtedly further enhanced by the contrast with the "wicked" outside world, which is experienced as stigmatizing [25].

4.2.4 A World Where Women and Girls Gain Independence

Another aspect sometimes mentioned is that wearing the veil is, for some girls, a way to gain independence and liberation. For these girls, the headscarf allows them to reconcile the two aspects (French and Muslim). They can wear it to go out, thus escaping potential confinement in the private space [44]. The veil legitimizes the externalization of women, the refusal of rules deemed unfair, and simultaneously gives a moral meaning to their lives, in the absence of an alternative solution in French society where they consider that there is no longer a collective enterprise to establish meaning [44].

4.2.5 A World Where Women and Girls Assert Themselves

The wearing of the veil has also developed in a manner quite distinct from what has been observed in the traditional Muslim world, in a modern way, one might say. It then represents for the girls a way of self-affirmation, sometimes vis-à-vis parents (if the veil is worn against their will), but also vis-à-vis French society, represented by the school. They feel that their parents have abandoned their religion and submitted to the culture of the host country. In this context, the wearing of the veil has been regarded as Muslim hypermodernity and compared to certain youth movements like the punk movement of the 1990s. It is thus philosophically justified as religion is perceived as a way to distinguish oneself through performance, to do difficult things precisely because they are difficult. This rigor that young girls impose on themselves, sometimes at the cost of rejection, appears rewarding to them [51].

This challenging aspect is also fairly important during adolescence, where personality is often constructed in opposition. Indeed, if we refer to the psychosocial theory of personality development proposed by the German American psychoanalyst Erik Erikson, we observe that stage five, which occurs between the ages around twelve and twenty, is characterized by a struggle between identity and confusion. At this stage, the personality becomes strengthened, and the crisis is linked to the question “who am I?” Tensions with parents and authority figures are present as the adolescent tries to establish their own preferences and interests [30].

Moreover, at this age, the adolescent has at their disposal all the linguistic functions identified by Halliday in *Learning How to Mean* [37]. Since childhood they acquired the instrumental function (which enables expressing needs), the regulatory function (which facilitates making requests to others), the interactional function (which facilitates building relationships), and the personal function (which enables expressing emotions, opinions, and one’s identity). The adolescent possesses of course also the ability to use the heuristic function (which enables the acquisition of knowledge), the imaginative function (which allows for creativity), and finally, the representational function (which facilitates the transmission of information).

All of these combined aspects, as outlined above, contribute to the frequent association of wearing a veil with an assertive discourse and/or attitude.

4.2.6 The Reign of Patriarchal Law

Of course, not all girls wear the veil voluntarily. The press sometimes reports on young girls who are compelled by their surroundings (family or sometimes neighborhood) to wear the veil or other clothing concealing their bodies. The wearing of a religious symbol is, for these girls, pure and simple coercion, and their worldview is one of subjugation. For these young girls, the prohibition of wearing religious symbols in school represents genuine protection and an opportunity to denounce a situation they did not choose. The existence of these situations cannot be denied, and they are part of the semantic variation within the ideational function.

Without a doubt, the ideational function of the message is very varied. It depends on the circumstances and often encompasses multiple facets simultaneously. We might even compare it to a lexical system that Halliday regards as being open, as new words continually come into it [38]. This multiplicity of semantic components can be the source of difficulties at the level of the interpersonal function, which is the function of interacting with other people.

5 Interpersonal Function of the Religious Sign

The interpersonal metafunction relates to the tenor parameter of the sign (the term tenor referring to the participants in a discourse, their relationships to each other, and their goals) or in other words the interactivity of the sign. This function is influenced by three primary factors, which are the sender of the message, social distance between the sender and the receiver and respective social status. [36].

Regarding the sign sender, it is common to distinguish *imperative* and *declarative* aspects, which are expressed consciously or unconsciously. When the sender is a student wearing a religious symbol, as in our case, surveys indicate that in the majority of cases, apart from wearing this symbol, the student exhibit a generally neutral attitude, i.e. the declarative aspect appears to predominate. However, imperative aspects are not absent and can be subdivided into various communicative roles or sub-functions which can in turn shed light on the expressive use of the sign from the perspective of the sender [37]. Indeed, the imperative element can play an *instrumental role* with the aim of obtaining something from the interlocutor. This may encompass various aspects that we have seen within the ideational metafunction, such as cognition from the community to which the individual belongs, as well as from their family and peers. The imperative aspect can also have a *regulatory role* that aims at controlling the behavior of others. No sign is neutral, and by wearing a religious sign, one can appear to other Muslims as a “faithful believer”, in contrast to those who do not wear it, thus exerting indirect pressure on them. The *personal role* pertains to self-expression and the expression of one’s interests, a role that is mentioned by young Muslim women. Lastly, the *imaginative role* pertains to communicating the expression of one’s own conception of the environment and the world, which is evident in this case.

As for the receiver, we will distinguish two categories that are in direct contact with the sender, namely teachers and peers. In both cases, there is no distancing, as the sender and the receivers are in direct physical contact. However, between the sender and the teachers, there is an inequality in status, as the two do not have equal authority and knowledge. These factors can potentially influence mutual attitudes.

5.1 Teachers as Receivers of the Message

The perception of teachers/principals regarding religious symbols as direct recipients has been the subject of several opinion surveys, which demonstrate that, similar to pupils displaying such symbols, interpretations are diverse. This once again attests to the notion that the symbol serves as a medium with multiple potential meanings. Among these surveys, the latest is the one conducted in 2022 by the polling institute *Ifop*, a study including 1,009 teachers, representative of primary and secondary level teachers in mainland France [42].

The interpretations of religious symbols provided by teachers revolve around several axes, with the first being a legal violation in the form of proselytism.

5.1.1 Religious Sign as Legal Violation and Proselytism

The study shows that the teachers see the donning of a religious symbol first of all as a form of proselytism and a breach of the law on laicity. This assessment can be considered influenced by the positions taken by the political authorities of the nation, and by legal decisions handed down by the courts.

5.1.1.1 Political Authorities For many years, the government's stance could be characterized as cautious regarding religious symbols, and the higher political authorities preferred to let teachers and school principals assess situations on a case-by-case basis. This often led to dissatisfaction among those involved, as the latter were obliged to deal with the proliferation of religious (or non-religious) manifestations.

The attitude of the French government is now very clear and can be summarized by the recent response of Gabriel Attal, Minister of National Education, questioned by a journalist regarding the wearing of the abaya and the qamis in schools: "When you enter a classroom, you should not be able to identify the students' religion by looking at them", he explained [6].

This marks the end of a certain ambiguity adopted by the previous minister, Pap Ndiaye, who had emphasized that the State, in its law for a secular school, had not compiled a list of prohibited attire or symbols and had rejected the idea of creating one. When questioned about the matter of abayas in the Senate, he had stated, "We would be venturing into an extremely complex terrain. From a legal perspective, defining the abaya is not straightforward, and we would be confronted the following week by the length of a dress, the shape of a collar, or by various accessories that would prolong the issue week after week and compel us to issue multiple circulars"[33].³ In accordance with this position, a circular from November 2022 instructed school principals to determine whether an abaya is religious or not, illegal or not, based on two main criteria: the frequency of wearing the dress and the refusal of the student to remove it [16].

The new stance is markedly different and appears as a clear form of radicalization that leads to the rejection of almost any form of religious expression in school (outside of designated areas) and the affirmation of a secular culture that recognizes only abstract individuals. Indeed, no more individual case analysis, and as already mentioned, Minister Gabriel Attal has indicated that abayas and qamis should be regarded as religious attire [6]. We are thus confronted with what some perceive as a paradox since the government seems to acquire a teleological and transcendental power [2] that allows it to determine what is religious, and which is perceived as contrary to the spirit of secularism, dictating that the state should not concern itself with religion. As Baldi pointed out, "the sovereign [...] decides which symbols are to be regarded as 'religious' and, by so doing, it 'legitimizes' a specific concept of religion and the religious subject while legitimizing, at the same time, its character of absolute representative of a people" [4].

However, we like to point out that the theory of state neutrality is a theory about neutrality, but it is not, and cannot be a neutral theory in itself. It expressed a republican or liberal idea about the best way to separate the churches from the state, with a preference for secularism. Consequently, there is maybe no paradox in the State taking a position on religion, because there is no neutral definition of secularism either. This approach is endorsed by the entirety of the French political class, with the exception of certain left-wing movements, which perceive the recent prohibition of abayas and qamis as a resurgence of a religious war and the establishment of a "police du vêtement" [9].

³ Author's translation.

5.1.1.2 French Courts Laicity is a legal norm used in constitutional texts without a truly precise definition. It is indirectly present in Article 10 of the *Déclaration des droits de l'homme et du citoyen* of August 26, 1789, which is included into the preamble of the current French Constitution of October 4, 1958 that confines religious expression within the bounds of public order, by stating that “No one shall be disturbed for their opinions, even religious ones, provided that their expression does not disrupt the public order established by law”. Furthermore, the preamble specifies that “The organization of free and secular public education at all levels is a duty of the State”, and Article 2 of the Constitution itself specifies that “France is an indivisible, secular, democratic, and social Republic. It ensures the equality before the law of all citizens without distinction of origin, race, or religion. It respects all beliefs” [24]. To this, of course, we must add the three laws (from 1905, 1882 and 2004) already mentioned.

These texts establish the position of the State Council on the matter, which can be summarized by saying that today, the Council advocates for a general prohibition of any religious symbol considered ostentatious, as evidenced by the recent confirmation of the ban on the abaya and the qamis [22]. A significant milestone must be noted in 2007 when the Council decided that it is the *behavior* of the pupil that should be evaluated and then possibly prohibited if this behavior demonstrates an intent to proselytize. If that is the case, even discreet, that is to say not ostentatious, signs can be prohibited. In this instance, it was the wearing of a bandana. On this occasion, we can consider that the court invented the concept of religious sign by intent as opposed to religious sign by nature, thus hardening the interpretation of the law by including signs that are not objectively religious [21].

5.1.1.3 The European Court of Human Rights and French Secularism The conformity of French law with the European Convention on Human Rights was also addressed at the European judicial level [31]. Indeed, on several occasions, the European Court has been seized and called upon to pronounce on the prohibition of religious symbols in French schools, whether it is the wearing of the hijab or the *dastar*. As a general rule, the Court considers that the ban on conspicuous religious symbols is in accordance with the European Convention on Human Rights. Regarding the proportionality of the ban, the Court asserts that the exclusion from a public institution is not disproportionate as it is possible to pursue education through distance learning, in a private institution not subject to the law, or through home education by the family [26].

The court’s reasoning is based on the distinction between religion, which is protected by the freedom to believe or not, and the expression/manifestation of that belief, which can be restricted and regulated. Such a restriction, the possibility of which is acknowledged by Article 9 of the European Convention on Human Rights,⁴ is often challenged and criticized as a factor that raises serious questions regarding the respect for democratic values of freedom and equality [3].

⁴ Article 9: Freedom of thought, conscience and religion.

9.1 Everyone has the right to freedom of thought, conscience and religion; this right includes freedom to change his religion or belief and freedom, either alone or in community with others and in public or private, to manifest his religion or belief, in worship, teaching, practice and observance.

In general, the *Ifop* survey shows that teachers' understanding of religious symbols is in alignment with the interpretation provided by political and judicial authorities. However, recently, a significant number of teachers, mainly under the age of thirty, distinguish themselves and are in favor of the possibility to wearing traditional loose-fitting clothing (as abayas) (41%, compared to 13% of those over fifty), as well as for supporting the right of secondary school students to wear religious head coverings (32%, compared to 8% of those over fifty) [42]. The opinion of these teachers may align with that of the United Nations Human Rights Committee. Indeed, in 2004, a Sikh high school student was expelled from his school for refusing to remove his *dastar*. After unsuccessfully filing a complaint with the country's administrative courts, he approached the United Nations Human Rights Committee. In an opinion dated November 2012, the Committee determined that the French state had not provided irrefutable evidence that the disciplined student, by not removing his turban, violated the rights and freedoms of other students or the proper functioning of his establishment. The Committee also deemed that "the penalty of the pupil's permanent expulsion from the public school was disproportionate and led to serious effects on the education to which the author, like any person of his age, was entitled". The Committee concluded that the student's expulsion from his high school constituted "a violation" of the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, and that France, as a signatory to this Covenant, was, therefore, doubly obligated to rectify the injustice done to the student (including through appropriate compensation) and to prevent similar violations from recurring in the future [67]. Despite this view, it must be noted that no student has so far succeeded in swaying the French state in its interpretation of secularism, and it is highly likely that this will continue to be the case in the future.

Another interpretation offered by the teachers encompasses the idea that the religious symbol is evidence of the radicalization of its wearer.

5.1.2 Religious Sign as Proof of Radicalization

The survey shows that the religious symbol, when of Muslim obedience, is generally interpreted as a symbol of radicalization and Islamic fundamentalism [35], and as such triggers a fear among the teachers. Indeed, a majority of teachers acknowledge their apprehension regarding the potential management of situations in which a student may wish to wear traditional and/or religious attire in the classroom (59%). It must be said that the French school is plagued by significant tensions, especially since the tragic incident involving the murder of the history teacher Samuel Paty in 2020 [60]. This incident is a source of significant distress among many educators [42]. Consequently, 47% express concerns about addressing the motives behind the assassination (a figure that rises to 57% in disadvantaged areas), and 28% are uneasy

Footnote 4 (continued)

9.2 Freedom to manifest one's religion or beliefs shall be subject only to such limitations as are prescribed by law and are necessary in a democratic society in the interests of public safety, for the protection of public order, health or morals, or for the protection of the rights and freedoms of others.

about working in an institution bearing the name of Samuel Paty (40% in disadvantaged areas). Presenting caricatures of religious figures to students, which was cited as a pretext for the harassment and murder of Samuel Paty, is a situation feared by nearly two-thirds of teachers (62%) [42].⁵

The fear the teachers express is even fueled by the idea that behind the young pupils wearing a religious symbol lies an ideology and fundamentalist movements that manipulate them to varying degrees. In this context, social networks and the Muslim Brotherhood movement are sometimes mentioned, and the anthropologist Florence Bergeaud-Blackler describes in *Le Frérisme et ses réseaux* how the Muslim Brotherhood movement seeks to implement a strategy of Islamization in non-Muslim countries, in various domains, including education [7].

5.1.3 Religious Sign as Challenge to Gender Equality

The idea that the religious sign can be a symbol of backwardness and sexism arises from the fact that the majority of conflicts within the French school system involve young (Muslim) girls, although the law makes no distinction between genders. Teachers harbor concerns for their veiled pupils, fearing that they may be victims of subjugation. In the eyes of teachers, the veiled young girl is then seen as representing all women.

This evaluation of the religious symbol is furthermore validated by certain feminist movements. In the aftermath of the 2004 law banning religious symbols in schools, the most prominent French feminist movements adopted opposing stances and two particularly emblematic organizations clashed on the ideological front. On one hand, there was the *Collectif féministe du Mouvement des Indigènes de la République*, which opposed the law and argued that it could lead to the exclusion of certain girls from school; they perceived the legislator's position as "postcolonial" in the sense that it perpetuates a colonial mindset and an essentialist view of North African Muslim populations [1]. On the other hand, there was the *Ni Putes Ni Soumises* movement, or the *Collectif Femmes sans voile d'Aubervilliers*, two associations of Muslim obedience in favor of the law. They denounce the pressures faced by young girls to wear the veil and, as the majority of French feminist organizations, they see the veiled young girls as victims of sexism within their family environment, the law as a means to liberate them from oppression, and the school as a kind of sanctuary to be safeguarded for the defense of women's rights [34, 68].

5.1.4 Religious Sign as Rejection of Assimilation

Finally, responses given by the teachers show that they see the religious symbol as a sign of French *communautarisme* and a rejection of assimilation. The concept of *communautarisme* is considered to be broader and more politically

⁵ It is a concern that this situation may have further deteriorated since the assassination of a French teacher (Dominique Bernard) in Arras on October 13, 2023, by a former student who had become radicalized as an Islamist.

charged than in English *communalism* [52]. It refers to a general distrust of allowing ethnic, cultural, or religious communities of origin to express their identities over and above republican universalism. It is often contrasted with a so-called “Ango-Saxon” multiculturalism, which is assumed to encourage ghettoization and mutual antagonism [52]. *Communaularisme* is a word that has operated in French political discourse as a generally accepted marker of illegitimacy [66]. Those who are accused of it are suspected of rejecting the French principle of cultural assimilation [65] and are equated with the “other”: “If, in the past, the ‘enemy’ was identified with the ‘stranger’, the ‘outsider’, the ‘uncontrollable’ nowadays, Islam has become the ‘other’ and the *hijab* the symbol of ‘otherness’”[5].

It should, however, not be inferred from this observation that the law prohibiting religious symbols in schools is an anti-Muslim law. As we have seen, it has also legitimized the ban on a *dastar* and can be invoked against Christian symbols. As we did not find any instances where the wearing of a Christian symbol led to a confrontation, we decided to conduct a little experiment that holds no statistical significance, but which can be viewed as a small case study. We asked three 17-year-old high school boys in Eastern France to attend classes (in three different public schools) wearing, for two of them, relatively conspicuous wooden crosses (about ten centimeters in height), and for one of them, a T-shirt bearing the message “I Love Jesus”. The three students were summoned to the principal’s office of their respective high schools and were asked, after a reminder of the principle of secularism, to remove the religious symbols, which they willingly did.

5.1.5 A summary of the Responses Provided by the Teachers

In an attempt to gather and succinctly summarize the responses provided by the teachers, we can draw inspiration from the model delineated by the linguists Martin and White in *The Language of Evaluation: Appraisal in English*, which offers a condensed and effective approach. These two researchers think in terms of *attitude*. Attitude comprises three semantic dimensions, namely affect (emotions), judgment (ethical evaluation of concrete behaviors), and appraisal (abstract estimation) [56]. As we have observed, the attitudes elicited by the presence of religious symbols are quite diverse among the teachers. If we gather them and present them in a graph, the following result is obtained (Fig. 2).

This very rudimentary chart, derived from the results pertaining to teachers’ attitudes toward religious symbols, does not include all the responses but only those that constitute the majority (figures of 50% and above). Its virtue lies in demonstrating that the core of the attitude held by the majority of teachers, namely affect, is composed of fear and disapproval, which inevitably influences the levels of judgment and appraisal.

The results obtained from the teachers reflect the opinion of most of the French population. Indeed, an opinion study conducted in 2023 shows that more than three-quarters of the French population (77%) remain opposed to the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols (crosses, veils, kippahs, etc.) by public middle and high school students. Half of the population (47%) even declares itself “strongly opposed” to it. The minority supporting the wearing of conspicuous religious

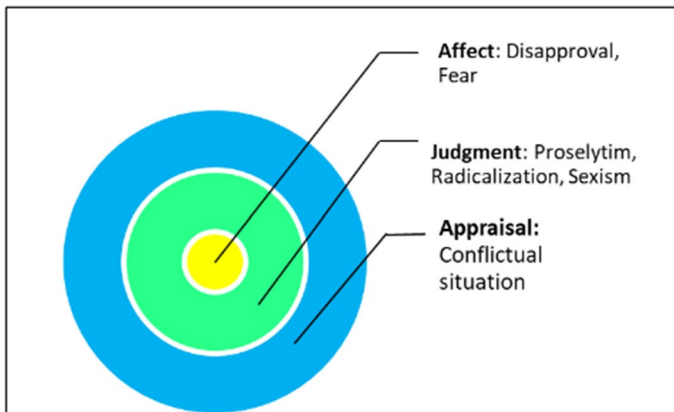


Fig. 2 Attitude of a majority of teachers towards the religious sign

symbols in schools has slightly decreased since 2020, now standing at 23% of the French population (down 2 points). The degree of religious belief influences one's perception of the subject: 80% of committed atheists are opposed to the wearing of conspicuous religious symbols by middle and high school students in public schools, compared to "only" 63% of French individuals self-identifying as believers and religious. A survey conducted in 2020 showed that 44% of French Muslims support the law prohibiting the wearing of religious symbols in public schools, with this ban being particularly supported by Muslim women who never veil their hair (59%) [40]. A clear generational divide emerges on the topic of religious signs in public schools: while seniors are among the staunchest opponents of wearing such symbols (86% are against), individuals aged 18–24 are genuinely divided (54% opposing) [43], a result that, to some extent, aligns with the one obtained from pupils.

5.2 Peers as Receiver of the Message

The shaping of meaning carried out by the symbolic activity leads to an entirely different conception on the part of the peers. Indeed, a survey published in 2021 shows that 52% of high school students are mainly in favor of the freedom of wearing religious outfits in public high schools [41]. It is a proportion significantly higher than in the adult population of France where only 23% is in favor of this leniency [43]. The same study shows that young people do not link this phenomenon to secularism but rather to the right to wear any clothing one wishes to wear.

The attitude of a majority of high school students is distinctly characterized by an affect marked by tolerance, a judgment regarding students as being free to wear clothing of their choice, and an appraisal concluding a state of harmony among diverse cultures and religions, as can be summarized on the graph below (Fig. 3).

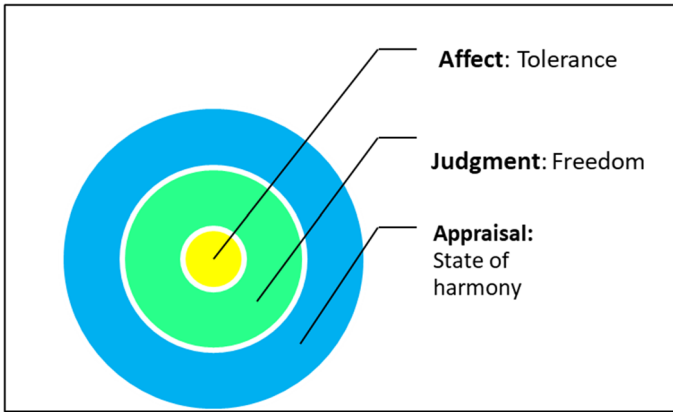


Fig. 3 Attitude of a majority of peers towards the religious sign

6 Convergence of the Ideational Function and the Interpersonal Function within a Single Discourse: the Textual Function

For a message to be satisfactorily conveyed, it is necessary for the three functions of language — the ideational function, the interpersonal function, and the textual function — to operate harmoniously. Even though the concept of system is present at various levels of the analysis, which consistently acknowledge the existence of possible choices within semiotic systems of interpretation, it is at the point of the textual function that it becomes maybe most apparent. Indeed, it is at this level that all facets of the ideational function, as well as the different aspects of the interpersonal function have a chance to be appreciated by the communicating parties. The textual function, which is the function of creating coherent speech is most effectively realized through the use of words. This becomes evident when one observes communication regarding religious symbols in schools. Clearly, all semantic aspects contained within the sender's action are not grasped by the receiver. This is mainly due to the fact that the communication is primarily non-verbal and relies on visual signals. In our case, we observe as a consequence, that several aspects of the ideational function are not perceived by the receiver (as shown by the surveys). Indeed, teachers see mostly the religious sign as a way to proselytize for a particular religion, and therefore a breach of the law on secularism, or as a manifestation of sexism or French communalism.

But this is not necessarily the message the student displaying a religious sign wishes to transmit. As we have seen, the girls wearing a hijab do not name proselytism (just as they do not mention the desire to instill fear in their teachers) as one of their motivations, it does not appear as an ideational function.

This aspect is however central in the spirit of the law as evidenced by the position of the State Council in the case known as the bandana affair in 2007 [21] and more recently, in 2015, when a fifteen-year-old girl attended school wearing a skirt long enough to concern the school principal that she was displaying a religious symbol. The Minister of Education of 2015, reminded on that occasion that no student can be

excluded because of the length or the color of their skirt. But the minister then supported the headmaster, by saying that the teaching team showed good judgement by requesting the girl to change her attire, in so far as the proselytizing character was not linked to the outfit, but to the attitude of the student [62].

Does this imply that, on the contrary, authorities (teachers, principals, minister) are wrong to interpret certain signs as religious symbols, capable of having a proselytizing effect, without first discussing with the concerned students or evaluating their behavior?

As previously discussed, we contend that the determination of the religious or non-religious nature of a garment by a non-religious, public authority in a secular country does not necessarily present a paradox, and we believe that from a semiotic perspective, the proselytizing character can be solely associated with specific clothing. Indeed, by briefly calling upon Peirce's theory of signs, we are reminded that every sign is simultaneously a *message* composed of three elements, namely the object (for example the veil), the representamen (the visual image of the veil worn by the student), and the interpretant (the meaning associated with this image). So, whether they desire it or not, whether they are aware of it or not, girls wearing a veil are sending a message. Nevertheless, it is important to emphasize that the interpretation of this message depends on the clarity of the sign, but also on the good faith of the receiver who has an ethical responsibility not to voluntarily misinterpret it. According to us, this amounts to not treating in the same way religious signs by nature (inherently religious symbols such as a hijab, kippah or cross) and religious symbols by intent, namely objects that are not inherently religious but become so, due to the student's discourse (as in the example of the too long skirt).

When a garment is inherently religious, it can be understood and justified that the focus and responsibility are placed on the recipient of the message, who then determines whether it contravenes the law or not. But when a garment has a debatable religious character, there should be a shift in perspective, allowing the emitter the opportunity to express themselves. It is then through dialogue that the proselytizing aspect can be assessed.

6.1 Dialogic Aspect of the Textual Function

The textual function is legally recognized whenever an issue related to religious symbols arises. It manifests itself in the form of a mandatory dialogue prescribed by the *Handbook on Secularism in Schools* [58] issued by the Ministry of Education, in collaboration with the *Conseil des sages de la laïcité et des valeurs de la République*, a body composed of experts from various backgrounds mandated to clarify the position of the educational institution regarding secularism.

Without dialogue, we end up in absurd situations, such as that of a high school student in Lyon who was asked to remove a type kimono she was wearing open over jeans and a T-shirt, in spite of the fact that such attire is entirely in line with the summer 2023 fashion trend, which has favored oversized long shirts, with no connection to any specific religion [19].

6.1.1 Risk of Semiotic Failure: Ellipses and Disfluencies

With the textual function, individuals have the possibility to organize their discourse into units of information that interconnect, so as to emphasize what is important in their narrative, or to distinguish between what is already known and what constitutes new information. But, despite the obligation to engage in dialogue/text, it cannot be said that the textual function always operates satisfactorily. Numerous testimonials show that there are indeed gaps, linguistic ellipses, in the information regarding laicity, given that a significant portion of students does not comprehend its origin, history, or its purpose today. In fact, when asked about their understanding of the 2004 law, some students responded that it is a law against Muslims. Without yet being in the majority, the defamatory label of “Islamophobia” is closely associated with the law on laicity, to the extent that a significant number of high school students (37%) perceive it, if not as “against Muslims” at least as discriminatory towards them [41]. This partial knowledge can only be completed through a more comprehensive explanation of secularism within the school system, but also, may we suggest, within the various churches operating in France. Recognized religious authorities, such as the French Council for Muslim Worship (*Conseil Français du Culte Musulman*), the Representative Council of French Jewish Institutions (*Conseil Représentatif des Institutions Juives de France*), the Representative Council of Sikhs in France (*Conseil représentatif des Sikhs de France*), or the Conference of Bishops of France (*Conférence des Evêques de France*) could be called upon to contribute in a beneficial manner to the education of the young population. As an example of this cooperation, we can name that in early 2021, the French government called upon prominent Islamic organizations in France to endorse the Charter of Principles of Islam in France. This document mandates Muslim leaders to follow the principles of freedom, equality, and fraternity; reject all forms of external influence and the exploitation of Islam for political agendas; uphold reason and free will; adhere to secularism and public services; and combat anti-Muslim prejudice, propaganda, and misinformation [23]. Conversely, these institutions can assist in enlightening French authorities regarding the religious symbols that identify them.

Another factor that may pose a risk of semiotic failure is the government’s hesitations (disfluencies) on various fronts, which is particularly evident in the case of the abayas and qamis. Initially, through its Minister of Education, Pap Ndiaye, the government had declined to make a determination about the nature of abayas and qamis, leaving it to the principals of educational institutions to determine the proselytizing (or non-proselytizing) behavior of the student. The abayas and qamis would then have been religious by intent under certain circumstances. This stance was abandoned in favor of a more radical position by Minister Gabriel Attal, asserting, as already mentioned, that the abaya and qamis are religious symbols: religious by nature, then. This opinion was confirmed by the State Council [22] and it has the advantage to reassure school principals as it relieves them from the obligation of having to make a difficult decision. At the same time, it might give students, especially Muslims, the impression of an increasing radicalization against them.

Despite the challenges, the dialogue still demonstrates its efficacy. Taking again the example of the abaya, which has sparked numerous controversies, it can be

observed that when the pupils went back to school in 2023, on Tuesday, September 5th, there were 298 cases of students wearing an abaya. After a dialogue with each of the students, 231 students agreed to change their outfit. The remaining 67 had to return home, but the dialogue remains open with them and their families [48]. While the textual function resolves the practical issue in most cases through dialogue, it remains true that the experience of students compelled to remove an article of clothing is one of frustration. As for those who refuse to change their attire, the only remaining option is attending a private denominational school, a solution that sounds like a defeat, and an acknowledgment of the much-criticized *communautarisme*.

7 Applicable Linguistics as Socially Accountable Linguistics

One of the characteristics of the model proposed by Halliday is that it should ideally help find solutions to resolve social difficulties. We do not presume to achieve this, but hope to have, at the very least, contributed to identifying problematic areas by confronting the various functions of signs. That being said, we will not shirk our responsibilities, and therefore, will mention some modest possible avenues for development.

We named, citing Tarde, the role of imitation in the adoption of a religious symbol. But a society cannot be solely a place of imitation and for an evolution to be possible, new customs, new opinions – in short, new complexes of beliefs and desires to imitate – must emerge. This condition is met when, for instance, two societies encounter each other, and their members offer themselves as examples to each other [18]. Effecting changes at the societal level requires replacing in each individual the concrete and habitual forms of beliefs and desires with other forms, but this can only happen if the conditions are conducive to such an evolution. It is a gradual process including variations and combinations, and finally, what Tarde calls substitution. In our case, this would imply adopting, on one hand, a less dogmatic form of secularism, and on the other, drawing inspiration from Western fashion to explore new modes of expression. The bandana would be the perfect example of such an evolution as it allows for hair coverage while perfectly integrating into Western fashion culture (provided that the student wearing it does not engage in proselytizing discourse).

Another solution seems to be emerging recently. It concerns the reintroducing in all public schools of uniforms clothing pupils from head to toe. President Macron has expressed support for “experiments” and an “evaluation” of wearing uniforms in schools [50]. This solution would have the advantage of aligning with the concept of neutrality inherent in secularism and more importantly, it would shift from the notion of prohibition to that of obligation for all, thus avoiding the stigmatization of a particular religion (and gender). If not equality (for even children know that the equality created by the uniform is only a kind of facade and that deep socio-economic differences would be maintained within the group), at least apparent religious neutrality could be achieved in this manner.

Finally, we believe that the appeasement of religious tensions can come from a teaching incorporating to a greater extent humanistic education about different religious and philosophical systems and gender-inclusive perspectives.

8 Conclusion

Throughout this study we have employed a social-semiotic lens, drawing from Michael Halliday's systemic functional linguistics, to dissect the intricate challenges posed by religious signs within the secular French school system. The exploration of three pivotal metafunctions – ideational, interpersonal, and textual – has provided a comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted role of these signs. The ideational function elucidated the capacity of religious signs as semi-otic tools for representing the world and interpreting human experiences. It has highlighted that pupils donning a religious sign see the world as a place where religion is/should be visible and respected, a place mindful of culture and traditions where one can be part of a community of peers and gain independence as well as assert oneself, but also sometimes, a place where patriarchal law prevails.

The interpersonal function shed light on the roles the signs can play for the sender as instrumental, regulatory, personal, and imaginative communicative tools. As for the receiver, we have distinguished between the teachers and the peers. The teachers see the religious sign foremost as a legal violation and proselytism (confirmed in this position both by political authorities and courts). Furthermore, they declare that religious signs can be proof of radicalization as well as a challenge to gender equality and a rejection of assimilation. On the other hand, peers are in favor of the freedom to wear any clothing at school.

The scrutiny of the textual function highlights the pivotal role it plays in harmonizing all functions to facilitate effective communication through the use of words. Words and dialogue help the receiver to grasp all semantic aspects contained within the sender's action and help the sender to perceive all aspects of the message they are conveying. In an ideal scenario, dialogue should facilitate the convergence of two opposing worldviews. More often than not, it leads to conflict resolution through the student's abandonment of the religious sign within the school premises and only a very few cases remain unresolved.

Funding Open access funding provided by Linnaeus University.

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