

VOICES OF FASHION, WORDS OF REBIRTH: THE LINGUISTIC IMPACT OF ELLE MAGAZINE IN POST-WAR FRANCE (1945–1946)

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Abstract

This study delves into a linguistic analysis of *Elle* magazine in its foundational period, examining the first 32 issues published between November 1945 and June 1946. It aims to explore the role of fashion terminology as a mirror of broader sociocultural transformations in post-war France. This article is structured in three main sections: the first outlines the magazine's historical and editorial context, highlighting its unique editorial approach and groundbreaking tone, a testament to its founder's influence. The second presents the methodology for the corpus creation, preparation and processing. The third section explores the terminological results alongside the magazine's thematic content. The analysis led to the creation of a glossary providing a clear overview of the French fashion lexicon of the period, while also offering insight into evolving values and new representations of femininity. Through the intersection of terminological analysis and historical-cultural reflection, this study shows how fashion terminology functions as a vehicle of memory, identity, and transformation.

Keywords

Women studies, Fashion, Women's Magazines, *Elle*, Terminology.

Introduction

In the French publishing landscape of the post-war period, the launch of the weekly magazine *Elle* in November 1945 stands as a symbolic event in the cultural revival and the redefinition of social roles in post-Occupation France. The magazine immediately distinguished itself through its ability to combine light-hearted content with serious topics, specialized language with accessible communication, positioning itself as a new forum for the representation of the modern woman. Fashion, far from being merely an aesthetic domain, allows to interpret and translate the ongoing social and cultural dynamics (Bouverot, 1999; Zanolà 2014; Zanolà 2021).

This study aims to highlight *Elle* as a subject of linguistic and thematic analysis, exploring the fashion-related terminology used in the magazine's early issues and its role in constructing femininity in France between 1945 and 1946 (cf. D'Achille & Zanolà, 2005). Through an interdisciplinary approach that blends linguistics, fashion history, and media analysis, it offers a reflection on the potential of women's press as a vehicle for social representation and transformation.

***Elle's* Genesis in Post-War France**

In November 1945, France was emerging from one of its most dramatic chapters in its history. After five years of war, the German occupation, and the collaborationist Vichy regime, the country faced an urgent need for reconstruction, not only of its material infrastructure, but also of its moral, social, and cultural fabric. Within this challenging context, women, silent protagonists of the Resistance, industrial labour, and domestic economies during the conflict, began to seek new forms of legitimacy in the public sphere (Adlington, 2019). It was also during these years that women obtained the right to vote in France: this recognition marked a crucial turning point in the struggle for women's emancipation. It is within this historical framework that *Elle: l'hebdomadaire de la femme* was born, destined to become one of Europe's most influential women's magazines. Founded by Hélène Gordon-Lazareff, a cosmopolitan journalist trained between Paris and New York who had worked for the *New York Times* and *Harper's Bazaar* and had collaborated with renowned fashion icons such as Diana Vreeland and Carmel

Snow (Grumbach, 1993), *Elle* drew inspiration from the American women's magazine model, proposing an innovative editorial structure (Colombani & Fitoussi, 2005). Addressing French women directly, it promoted the image of a modern and independent woman, capable of "having it all", of reconciling domestic responsibilities with professional and social life (Grandpierre, 2012). To do so, the magazine adopted an original and dynamic editorial format that blended diverse content, fashion, health, cuisine, current affairs, and political commentary, into a cohesive and engaging whole. Readers were no longer treated as passive recipients but as active and discerning participants in the cultural conversation (Tournier, 2020).

One of *Elle*'s defining features was its entirely female editorial team, a magazine run by women for women. This specificity translated into a direct, modern, and engaged editorial voice, breaking away from the paternalistic tone prevalent in earlier media. As a result, *Elle* emerged as a key discursive space for rethinking female identity in the aftermath of war. Its strength lay in its ability to intuitively address the expectations of its audience while simultaneously serving as a vital platform for the fashion industry (Perier, 1995; Pringle, 1995). Madame Lazareff's editorial vision aimed to provide a publication capable of weaving together everyday life and cultural commentary with social reflection and in-depth social pieces. This editorial balance is encapsulated in her own words: "Je revendique avec *Elle* le sérieux dans la frivolité, l'ironie dans le grave" (Torianian, 2005). The magazine's success was grounded in its capacity to combine articles on the collections of contemporary *couturiers* with pieces addressing major postwar issues, ranging from the experiences of women during the Second World War and the challenges of reconstruction, to advice on professional conduct and personal life (Baudot 1992; Baudot & Demachy 2002).

Its pages included anecdotes, games, and riddles designed to entertain, alongside portraits of the vedettes of the time, such as Madeleine Ozeray and Josette Day. Yet beyond entertainment, *Elle* also carved out a space for reflection and commentary. Notably, the very first article in the inaugural issue, published on 21 November 1945 and titled *France record du monde de députées*, reported the election of thirty-two women to the French National Constituent Assembly out of 575 deputies. The piece notes, with a touch of irony, that the only electoral list composed entirely of women failed to reach the 3% threshold. It then quotes President Roosevelt's wry comment on women in politics: "We like women to vote; we do not like them to be voted for." The article concludes with a sharp and ironic remark: "Parce que nous sommes féministes, mais nous ne sommes pas idiots" (*Elle*, n°1, 21/11/1945). Through such remarks, the magazine's underlying spirit of social analysis and critique begins to surface, subtly articulated through humour and a disarmingly light tone.

Methodology and Corpus Construction

The terminological analysis presented in this study is based on a corpus composed of the first thirty-two issues of *Elle* magazine, published between November 21, 1945, and June 25, 1946, resulting in a dataset of 32 documents, 25,061 sentences, 368,253 words, and 448,611 tokens. Corpus issues were accessed via Gallica, the digital platform of the Bibliothèque Nationale de France, which provides both .pdf and .txt versions. The .txt files underwent a cleaning process to ensure data reliability. This involved removing paratextual elements, incorrect encodings, and graphic interferences. The terminological extraction (Zanola 2012; Zanola, 2018), aimed to obtain a representative sample of post-war fashion terminology, was carried out using two complementary tools: Sketch Engine and TermoStat Web 3.0 (Kilgariff, 2014; Drouin, 2003).

While the extraction conducted through Sketch Engine served primarily a supporting and verification function, the list of candidate terms retained for the present study was provided by the TermoStat Web 3.0 extractor. The TermoStat Web 3.0 algorithm generated an output of 2,616 candidate terms, ranked according to their specificity score. From a morphosyntactic perspective, 56% of the extracted terms (1,475 units) consisted of simple nouns, while the remaining 44% (1,141 units) were multi-word expressions with various structures, such as N + Adj, N + Prep + N, and N + N. Only the terms with the highest specificity scores, deemed most representative of the domain, were chosen. The specificity scores of the selected terms ranged from 123.79 (for *robe*) to 17.67 (for *chemisier*). These 100 terms were then filtered and those belonging to the domain of reference were compiled into individual term records and subsequently grouped by thematic subdomain and organized alphabetically within a glossary. A qualitative approach was privileged, one that aimed not only to analyse term frequency, but also to explore how they were used and what they revealed about the magazine's cultural context.

Tales of Fashion, Tales of War

Alongside the terminological analysis, a socio-cultural analysis was also carried out, starting from a content-based study of the magazine's articles. This analysis revealed the plurality of registers and editorial intentions within the magazine. Besides columns devoted to the collections of contemporary *couturiers*, such as Balenciaga, Lelong, and Schiaparelli, *Elle* also featured articles addressing social and political issues. Fashion-related content coexists with features on the Second World War, interviews, testimonials, narratives, and current affairs, thereby demonstrating the magazine's remarkable ability to blend disparate discursive registers. Particularly noteworthy are the articles

published between November 1945 and May 1946, which document the impact of the global conflict on both French and international society. Examples include columns such as *Leurs épouses*, about the wives of Nazi criminals; the poignant reportage *Le Monastère des enfants perdus*; and the narrative *Nanine de Poméranie*, all exposing the horrors of war through its most vulnerable victims: women and children.

The magazine's role as a point of reference and social glue is made especially evident in this context. The article *Le Monastère des enfants perdus*, written by Curt Riess, special correspondent for *Elle*, recounts the harrowing testimonies of a group of Jewish children who survived Nazi concentration camps and were subsequently sheltered at the Innesdorf camp, administered by the U.N.R.R.A. (United Nations Relief and Rehabilitation Administration), an international humanitarian organization founded by forty-four countries with the aim of providing immediate aid and assistance to nations most affected by the war. The article resonated deeply with readers: many women wrote to *Elle's* editorial office, inquiring whether they could offer help or even adopt children; others seeking information about missing relatives. One woman, for example, asked whether her niece, deported to Auschwitz with her mother at the age of seven and a half, might be among the *enfants perdus*. Another offered to host the children; while another sought news of her younger sister Suzanne, deported at the age of six

along with their parents. *Elle* published a selection of four such letters as the opening content of issue no. 6 (December 26, 1945). The magazine stated that it was in contact with the U.N.R.R.A. and committed to providing readers with all necessary legal and administrative information regarding child adoption and tracing efforts. The publication of readers' letters illustrates how *Elle* acted as a bridge between war orphans and its readership, becoming a point of contact between the press and the public, and thereby contributing to the emergence of a collective and compassionate consciousness, capable of inspiring emotional engagement, concrete initiatives, and forms of civic participation.

At the same time, regular features such as *Elle à Paris*, *Elle est belle*, *Elle cuisine*, *Chez elle*, and *Elle se soigne* offered practical advice on daily life management, household economy, and personal care. These sections addressed the tangible needs of women living in a period marked by severe austerity and economic hardship in the aftermath of the conflict. Although these contents may appear light-hearted, they contributed to the construction of an image of the modern woman as attentive, competent, and capable of confronting the challenges of reconstruction with both pragmatism and grace. In this way, the magazine deployed a discursive strategy that merged utility with beauty, self-care with civic engagement, within an editorial framework capable of informing and educating through the lens of modern femininity.



Figure 1 - Photograph accompanying the article « Le Monastère des enfants perdus ». Original caption : « Logés, nourris, habillés, soignés, les enfants de la malchance deviennent joyeux et sans contrainte, des petits comme tous ceux des pays libres ». Source: «*Elle*», n° 3, 5 december 1945, p. 5, photograph of Charles T. Hacker. Archive BNF Gallica.

The magazine also included explicitly political content, addressing issues such as women's participation in elections, their working conditions, motherhood, and marriage. Articles dealing with women's right to vote, employment, and intimate relationships, especially those by Françoise Giroud (Future Minister for Women's Affairs during Jacques Chirac's presidency in 1974 and future Minister of Culture during Raymond Barre's presidency in 1976), demonstrate a clear editorial intent to accompany readers in their understanding of their social and civic roles. The reflection on the female condition extended beyond the private sphere to encompass political participation, the right to education, freedom of choice, and self-determination. From this perspective, *Elle* was not merely an illustrated magazine, but rather a discursive space for cultural mediation, where fashion became a vehicle

for values, ideals, and shared aspirations. Thus, *Elle* emerged as a discursive device capable of holding together frivolity and commitment, elegance and critique, contributing to the construction of a modern and multifaceted femininity, polyphonic and nuanced. The magazine's texts oscillate between the informative and the prescriptive, between the desire to guide aesthetic taste and the will to emancipate perception. Its readers were not treated as mere consumers but rather as subjects in formation, bearers of both material and symbolic needs.

To get back to the terminological analysis, the terminological extraction allowed for the identification of 100 specialised terms belonging to the domain of fashion, which were organised into five subdomains:

1. Couture (e.g., *corsage, emmanchure, manche, épaule, encolure*);
2. Textiles (e.g., *lainage, jersey, crêpe, laine, velours*);
3. Garments (e.g., *robe, jupe, chandail, paletot, manteau*);
4. Knitwear (e.g., *maille, tension, maille endroit, maille envers, rang*);
5. Accessories (e.g., *chapeau, ceinture, ruban, écharpe, gant*).

36% of the terms belong to the subdomain of *couture*, followed by 22% for *textiles*, 20% for *garments*, 14% for *knitwear*, and the remaining 8% for *accessories*. Within the *couture* subdomain, many terms refer to dressmaking (e.g., *emmanchure, encolure, dos, col, boutonnage, boutonnière, fentes, épaules*). Their considerable proportion is due to the precision with which garments were described. For instance, starting from *col*, it is possible to derive three additional complex terms referring to distinct collar types: *col rabattu*, *col châle*, and *col chemisier*. A particularly interesting finding emerges from the contextual use of these terms. As noted, terms such as *emmanchure, encolure, devant, dos, manches*, all pertaining to the sartorial domain, frequently appear in the descriptive passages devoted to garments, such as: “Un manteau de lainage léger, à emmanchure basse, orné de quatre poches”. They are especially prominent in the *Tricotons !* sections, which appear in nearly every issue and provide instructions on how to knit garments such as sweaters, gloves, scarves and much more. For example, issue no. 5 (19 December 1945) includes a *Tricotons !* section giving step-by-step instructions for making two sweaters, detailing the following components:

1. *Matériaux nécessaires*
2. *Mesures*
3. *Tension du tricot*
4. *Dos*
5. *Emmanchures*
6. *Épaules*
7. *Devant*

Moreover, issue no. 15 (27 February 1946) constitutes a special edition devoted to knitting, featuring a *Petit Lexique du Tricot* listing all abbreviations used in the knitting instructions.

Combined, the *garments* and *accessories* subdomains account for 28% of the terms. These categories include all the terms designating garments and accessories featured in the pages of the magazine, such as *robe, jupe, paletot, chandail, jaquette, sweater, pull-over, tricot, manteau, ceinture, écharpe, gants*. Once again, there is a notable overlap with the *Tricotons !* sections: given that the analysed months predominantly cover colder periods, the knitting projects typically focused on sweaters, gloves, and scarves. As for the *textiles* subdomain, the ten most specific terms are:

1. *lainage*
2. *jersey*
3. *crêpe*
4. *laine*
5. *velours*
6. *taffetas*
7. *satén*
8. *tissu*
9. *piqué blanc*
10. *mousseline*

The context in which textile-related terminology most frequently occurs is in the presentation of garments within the fashion columns. A few representative examples include:

- [1] « Robe de **lainage** rouge, poches en biais, boutons bordés d'or, ceinture étroite en cuir » (*Elle*, n°2, 28/11/1945) ;
 [2] « Habillez-vous de noir bien entendu, puisque c'est la mode. Mais d'un « noir gai » comme celui de la tunique de taffetas portée sur le noir solide d'une jupe de **lainage**. C'est la robe de Balmain. » (*Elle*, n°5, 19/11/1945);
 [3] « Robe de **jersey** tilleul, ornée de bandes de tricot du même ton formant deux pièces sur le devant et garnie de deux poches rabattues. Ceinture de cuir beige. Lambert » (*Elle*, n°13, 13/02/1946);
 [4] « Cette longue jupe de **crêpe** imprimé coulissée à la taille sur un ruban sera portée soit avec une blouse de **mousseline**, un chandail vif ou la veste blanche » (*Elle*, n°32, 25/06/1946).

Two terminological entries are provided below: one for *robe* and one for *maille*, respectively drawn from the garments and knitwear subdomains. These two terms were chosen as representative examples due to their highest specificity scores: *robe* occurs 516 times within the corpus, earning a specificity score of 123.79, while *maille* appears 282 times, with a score of 110.5.

Terme	<i>robe</i>
Marque Morphologique	n. f.
Domaine	mode
Sous-domaine	vêtements
Définition	Sorte de vêtement long d'un seul tenant, en forme de fourreau plus ou moins ample, qui enveloppe le corps, couvrant jusqu'aux genoux, aux mollets, aux chevilles ou aux pieds. Source: Le Dictionnaire de l'Académie française. Huitième Édition, 1932, consulté sur https://artflsrv04.uchicago.edu/philologic4.7/publicdicos/bibliography?results_per_page=25&start=26&end=37&start_date=&end_date=&group_by=head&head=robe [consulté le 06/11/2024].
Contexte	« Toutes les robes longues qui, pendant trois mois, avaient défilé dans les salons sur le dos des mannequins ornèrent les plus chic dos des Parisiennes. » Source: corpus « Elle » 1945-1946.
Variantes Synonymiques	/
Équivalents en Italien	(IT) <i>abito</i> s.m. Sources: https://leap.terminologia.it/restricted/list.php?q=robe&c=38 et http://www.iccdold.beniculturali.it/siti_tematici/Scheda_VeAC/lemmario/index.asp?page=consultazionealfabetica&lettera=A.html [consultés le 06/11/2024].
Notes Encyclopédiques	Des types de robes: caftan, robe empire, robe tube, robe-chemisier, robe-combinaison, robe-manteau, robe longue, robe courte. Source: https://leap.terminologia.it/restricted/list.php?q=robe&c=38 [consulté le 06/11/2024].

Terme	<i>maille</i>
Marque Morphologique	n. f.
Domaine	mode
Sous-domaine	tricot
Définition	Une maille est une boucle obtenue par effet de torsion du fil. Source: https://www.de-fil-en-epingles.com/lexique-tricot/ [consulté le 06/11/2024].
Contexte	« Prenez les aiguilles n° 3, travaillez au point de jersey (1 rang endroit, 1 rang envers), augmentez d'une maille à chaque extrémité à partir du 7e rang, ensuite tous les 6 rangs jusqu'à ce que vous obteniez 142 mailles . » Source: corpus « Elle » 1945-1946.
Variantes Synonymiques	/
Équivalents en Italien	(IT) <i>punto</i> s.m. - <i>maglia</i> s.f. Source: https://www.garnstudio.com/glossary.php?langf=fr&langt=it&lang=it [consulté le 06/11/2024].
Notes Encyclopédiques	Au montage, la maille est la boucle autour de l'aiguille et resserrée par un noeud. Source: https://www.de-fil-en-epingles.com/lexique-tricot/ [consulté le 06/11/2024].

The lexicon employed in the pages of *Elle* attests to a return to the refinement and elegance characteristic of French *haute couture*, while simultaneously preserving elements of lexical sobriety and formal simplification imposed by the economic conditions of the immediate post-war period. The recurring terms do not merely denote objects; they function as markers of cultural and aesthetic values. The frequent use of adjectives such as *simple* [5,

6, 7, 8], *élégante* [9, 10, 11, 12], and *raffiné* [13, 14, 15] constructs a discursive universe where fashion is portrayed as both accessible and elevated, modern yet rooted in French tradition.

[5] Si beaucoup de jeunes femmes ont adopté la natte qu'on porte ou en auréole ou en chignon sur la nuque ou roulée jusqu'au-dessus des oreilles, presque toutes les jeunes filles préfèrent la coiffure **simple** qu'un coup de peigne remet facilement en place.

[6] Ici encore, c'est avec des paillettes dorées, en formes de feuilles et de fleurs – faciles à trouver dans les grands magasins – qu'on transformera la robe la plus **simple** en robe *élégante*.

[7] Parce que... vous avez besoin d'une robe très *élégante* et que, en rapportant la basque et le drapé vous transformez rapidement une tenue toute **simple** en un modèle beaucoup plus habillé.

[8] Elle propose des décolletés audacieux et imprévus, des corselets gainant la taille, comme sur cette robe du soir dont la jupe, très **simple**, est en mousseline noire.

[9] La fiancée, très **élégante**, portait une robe de dentelle blanche qui lui venait aux genoux.

[10] Sous la fourrure qu'elle écarte apparaissent une **élégante** robe du soir, quelques bijoux... Une reine du cinéma comme tant d'autres ?

[11] Dans le troisième groupe, vous trouverez des robes du même style, mais rendues un peu plus **élégantes** simplement par le choix d'un lainage plus fin ou d'un velours uni.

[12] Les **élégantes** voulaient, pour les deux soirs de réveillon, toutes porter des robes longues et décolletées.

[13] Il y a, en particulier, certain plastron de diamants dont le chic **raffiné** éclipse même la richesse.

[14] Ses goûts, simples, sont d'une **raffinée**.

[15] Pour la **raffinée**, une monture noire ou blanche avec verres de toutes les couleurs.

The interplay between images and texts reinforces this representation: the magazine's drawings and photographs engage with a poetic and evocative lexicon that stimulates the readers' imagination. The earliest issues consistently emphasise novelty. The adjective *nouvelle* appears no fewer than 159 times. In the first issue of the magazine, two articles explicitly reference this idea. One article introduces the concept of *élégance nouvelle*, while the other does so in its very title: *La silhouette nouvelle*. This is no coincidence; rather, it aligns perfectly with the chronotopic analysis developed in the first section of this article. France, having just emerged from the war, faced the necessity of slow and gradual reconstruction. The notion of novelty evokes a new era, of rebirth and renewal, where women reclaim control of their lives, beginning with their clothing: no longer sacrificial or austere as during wartime, but rather different, *new*. Significantly, the article referring to *élégance nouvelle* inaugurates the theme of fashion in the magazine's manifesto piece entitled *Verdict sur l'Élégance*, on page 11 of the first issue (November 21, 1945). The article sets forth eight so-called "rules" or recommendations for elegance:

1. Do not follow fashion blindly and passively;
2. Actively choose what one likes, "*voilà l'élégance nouvelle*";
3. Always maintain a well-groomed appearance;
4. Preserve one's personality;
5. Give importance to accessories such as handbags, gloves, and shoes;
6. Highlight one's hair with an attractive, carefully brushed hairstyle;
7. Ensure flawless nails;
8. Apply light but correct makeup.

The article concludes with an ode to femininity and individuality, which fashion should enhance, not overshadow: "*Vive la féminité ! Vive la personnalité !*" The accompanying image, without a caption, features a design by Lucien Lelong: a *paletot* cinched at the waist with a belt and a straight skirt falling just below the knee. Fashion, in this context, became a language of identity, a communicative act, and a space for legitimization.



Figure 2 - *Elle*, Verdict sur l'élégance, 21/11/1945, p. 11. Archive BNF Gallica.

Conclusion

The analysis of *Elle* magazine during its first months of publication has highlighted the pivotal role that fashion terminology played in shaping and representing femininity in post-war France. Through the terminology selected, reinterpreted, and proposed to its readers, the magazine emerges as a space of cultural mediation, where new aesthetic standards take shape, shared values are reinforced, and new forms of female identity begin to emerge.

Fashion not only reflects but also produces culture, memory, and identity. *Elle*, through its innovative editorial stance and its ability to capture the transformations of its time, constitutes both a valuable testimony of women's condition in the post-war period and a privileged observatory of language and its social uses. Fashion thus becomes a mirror of a society in transition, capable of mending its wounds and translating them into language, style, and vision. Perhaps the most significant element to emerge is the role *Elle* played in shaping a post-war female consciousness. The magazine successfully balances lightness and commitment, aesthetic sensibility and social reflection, outlining a portrait of the modern woman, one who moves with ease between the worlds of fashion and current affairs. As Roland Barthes, *Elle*'s first severe critic (see Barthes, 1957), reminds us: "l'important, pour les femmes, n'est pas d'avoir une voix forte [...] mais une voix juste. Une voix qui accepte la subtilité" (Barthes, 1978). This "voix juste" is precisely what *Elle* managed to find and attain, offering a space for listening, dialogue, and inspiration (For a reflection on the relationship between fashion and language, see Barthes, 1967). This study not only documents the magazine's linguistic and cultural value but also proposes a research

model applicable to other editorial contexts and historical periods. It demonstrates that the language of fashion, far from ephemeral, can serve as a repository of collective memory, a critical device, and a bridge between past, present, and future.

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