BELGIUM'S NEW LINGUISTIC CHALLENGES

The language wars lie at the heart of Belgian history. Through a succession of bitter battles, endless power struggles and laborious compromises, Belgium's political leaders gradually managed to elaborate, adjust and readjust a legal framework likely to facilitate a fairly peaceful cohabitation of the populations and a reasonably effective functioning of the institutions. But while squabbles are still going on about the survival of linguistic "facilities" in a number of Flemish communes or about how fluent Brussels firemen need to be in Dutch, the linguistic landscape of Europe, Belgium and Brussels is undergoing unprecedented transformation which it is high time for us to appreciate.

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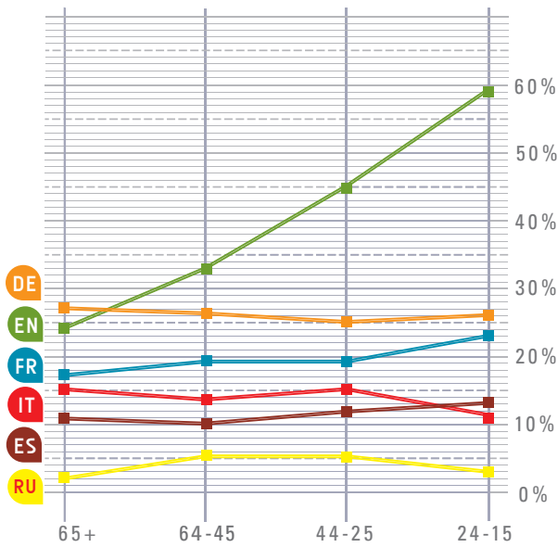
EN Before zooming in on Belgium and Brussels, let us first take a quick look at the process under way throughout Europe, now observable thanks to the special 2006 Eurobarometer, Europeans and their languages. By using as the relevant indicator the proportion of the population that claims to know a language "well" or "very well", either as their native tongue or as a foreign language, and by decomposing this indicator according to age groups, we can get a precise picture of the change at hand.

THE RISE OF ENGLISH

This change is truly spectacular (see Figure 1). As we move from the oldest group (65 and over) to the youngest group (15 to 24) we see that German, the first European language among retirees, is gradually being overtaken by French, partly owing to a fall in the birth rate in Germany. For analogous reasons, Italian is being overtaken by Spanish. There is, however, one phenomenon that dwarfs all others : the explosive spread of English. The knowledge of English, as measured, jumped from 24% to 59%, not at all as a result of unbridled procreation in the British Isles, but because the number of Europeans who learn English "well" or "very well" as a second or third language has risen from 10% to over 50%, compared a rise from 7% to 11%

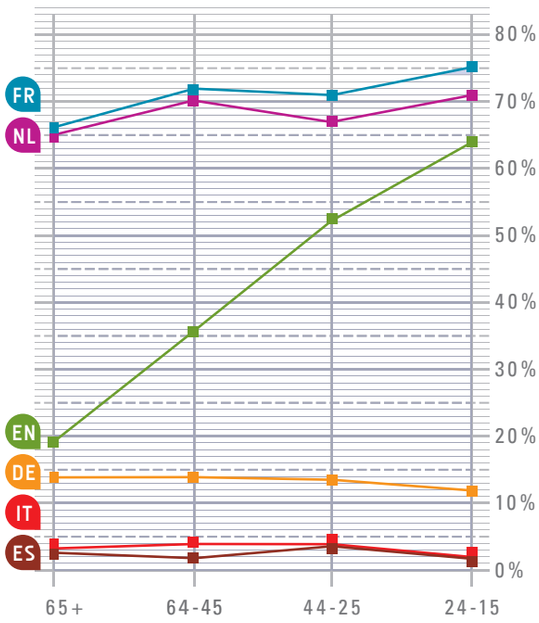
(1) EUROPE: LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE PER AGE GROUP (2005)

Percentage of EU25 residents who say they know a particular language well or very well (including mother tongue)



(2) BELGIUM: LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE PER AGE GROUP (2005)

Percentage of Belgian residents who say they know a particular language well or very well (including mother tongue)



for French. This process will not slow down; on the contrary it will accelerate as a result of a very simple cumulative mechanism: the greater the number of other people who speak a language, the more motivation and opportunities we have to learn it; and the better we learn it, for these reasons, ourselves, the more others are motivated to learn it, and the more opportunities they have to practice it.

This general European phenomenon is clearly noticeable in Belgium, with some local peculiarities (Figure 2). Although French is far less widespread as a native language, it catches up with Dutch in the oldest age group as a language that is spoken well or very well. In the younger age groups however, it surpasses Dutch, not because of a surge in the Walloon birth rate, but rather because of rising levels of schooling in Flanders, which have further widened the gap between the knowledge of French among Dutch-speakers and the knowledge of Dutch among French-speakers. However, in Belgium as elsewhere in Europe, the most spectacular phenomenon is the dramatic rise in the knowledge of English. In the oldest group, the knowledge of English is hardly more widespread than the knowledge of German, Belgium's third national language. By contrast, as we move from the oldest to the youngest group, we observe a decrease in the knowledge of German, while the knowledge of English, still measured in the same way, is close to reaching the level of French and Dutch. When today's adolescents will have completed their language-learning period, the order of the three languages will most probably be reversed. For their generation, English will have become the country's first language, Dutch the second and French the third. Why is French likely to drop from first to third? True, the knowledge of French among the Flemish will remain far greater than the knowledge of Dutch among the Walloon population, but the intensity of the learning process is likely to suffer from competition with English: the more proficient the Walloons and the French are in English, the less reason and opportunity there is for the Flemings to learn French.

BRUSSELS IS NO LONGER BELGIUM

The European data also give us an idea of the differences between the various parts of the country. What strikes us first is that there are now only three provinces where the knowledge of the second national language is greater than that of English, namely Brabant

wallon, Vlaams Brabant and West-vlaanderen, which borders on France. In all other provinces, including Brussels, English has caught up with or overtaken French and Dutch as a non-native language. Secondly, the linguistic panorama of the provinces matches only very imperfectly the official unilingualism in two of the three Regions and the official bilingualism in the third one. Knowledge of French is almost 100% in the five Walloon provinces and knowledge of Dutch does not drop significantly below 100% in the Flemish provinces except in Vlaams Brabant. However, Brussels is miles away from national bilingualism, even more than so than Brabant wallon and than all the Flemish provinces except Limburg. In fact it is Vlaams Brabant (with 94% of competent Dutch speakers and 66% of competent French speakers, and hence a comfortable majority of bilinguals), and not Brussels (with 31% and 96%, respectively, hence less than one third of bilinguals), that is by far the best placed to claim the title of Belgium's "bilingual region".

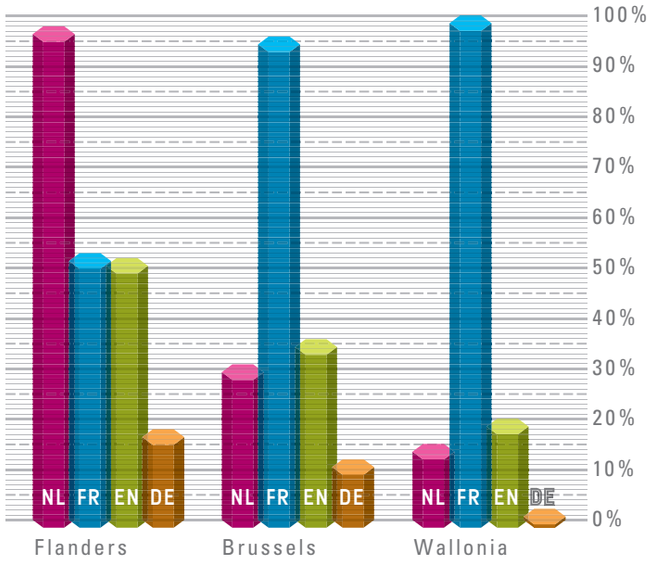
Should we then conclude that from a linguistic point of view Brussels could be considered a Walloon province? Not at all. To see this, all we have to do is look at the percentage of the population in each province and in Brussels who we can be regard as 'of Belgian descent', 'of non-Belgian European descent' and 'of non-European descent', respectively (using the estimates supplied by Jan Hertogen: www.npdata.be/Data/Socialebalans). In all the Flemish and Walloon provinces, people of Belgian descent exceed 80%. In Brussels, by contrast, they represent just 44%. The residents of non-European descent remain under 10% in all provinces, while in Brussels they make up one third of the population. In this respect Flanders and Wallonia resemble one another, while Brussels is becoming less and less Belgian, with an increasingly diverse population that is at the same time more multilingual than the rest of the country and less bilingual in the Belgian sense than half of the provinces.

Against this background, it is a valuable exercise to compare the three Regions in terms of knowledge of the four most widespread languages, whether as a native or as a learned language (Figure 3). The spread of German is widest in Flanders and – perhaps surprisingly – lowest in Wallonia, the German-speaking area included. English has become the second language in Wallonia and in Brussels, while French remains the second language in Flanders by a narrow margin. If we limit ourselves to these four languages, we can state unequivocally that Flanders is by far the most multilingual Region: the average knowledge of these languages is "good" or "very good" among 56% of the Flemish population, as opposed to 44% of the Brussels population and 34% of the Walloons.

From older (1999 as opposed to 2005) but more detailed data relating to the three most widespread languages, we can infer, in the case of Brussels, which part can be attributed to native language and which part to acquired language (Figure 4). The percentage of native English speakers is of course very small compared to the total number of people who speak English. The percentage of Brussels residents with Dutch as their only native tongue was at that time less than 10% then and the percentage of residents with French as their only native language was just above 50%. When we combine these figures with reasonable hypotheses on the sample bias and on the changes that have taken place in recent years, we may conclude that "Francophones", meaning the people for whom French is the native language, are a minority group in Brussels today. However, if we call "Francophone" anyone who speaks French well or very well, we come close to an estimate of 95% of "Francophones", that includes practically the entire Dutch-speaking population of Brussels.

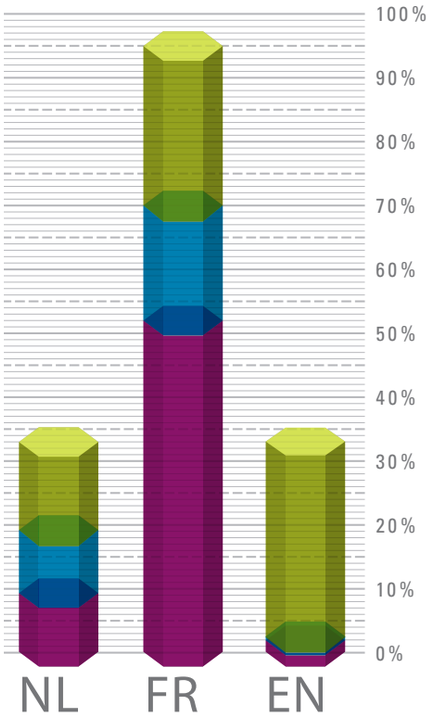
(3) BELGIUM: LINGUISTIC COMPETENCE PER REGION (2005)

Percentage of residents who say they speak Dutch (NL) , French (FR) , English (EN) and German (DE) well or very well



(4) BRUSSELS: PERCENTAGE OF DUTCH, FRENCH, AND ENGLISH SPEAKERS (1999)

LEARNED LANGUAGE
ONE OF THE NATIVE LANGUAGES
SOLE NATIVE LANGUAGE



THE CHALLENGE FOR BRUSSELS

This gives us a sense of today's linguistic reality, in Europe, in Belgium and in Brussels. In this light, what is to be done? The first step is to assert firmly that the spectacular spread of English is not only inevitable but also desirable, especially in Brussels. In Europe and the rest of the world we absolutely need a common language, one that is not monopolized by a small elite but is widely spread amongst all sections of the population. Through accidents of history this role has fallen to English. For us Belgians, what a stroke of luck! Whether our mother tongue is French or Dutch, of the 6000 languages spoken in the world today, English is one of the 10 to 15 languages that lie closest to our own. Even better: if there is one language in the world that can claim to lie precisely midway between French and Dutch, it is English and only English, which is after all but a dialect very similar to Frisian, which the Angles took with them when they crossed the Channel in the fifth century and which was later made unrecognisable by some Vikings who, after a few centuries of French lessons in Normandy, crossed the channel in turn to simplify its grammar and graft 10,000 French words onto it. Some inveterate narcissists will perhaps still manage to complain about the fact that the chosen language is not precisely the same as the one in which they were rocked by their mum. But this should not stop us rejoicing at our incredible luck.

Whether we lament the fact or rejoice it, European institutions will operate and communicate more and more, and more and more openly, in English. This is even truer for the steadily

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swelling European civil society that is being attracted to Brussels by the European institutions: journalists, lobbyists, consultants and law firms, as well as a wide range of associations. It is perfectly reasonable to expect an Estonian, who has already gone to the trouble of learning Russian and Latvian, to also learn English, which he needs in order to function in and around the European institutions. But how can we keep expecting that he should learn either, or even both, of Brussels' official languages, simply because a hesitant fate turned our national capital into the political capital of the European Union? "Facilities" for English are unavoidable. In fact they are already in place, even in the political realm. Thus, before the municipal elections of October 2006, a public electoral debate was held in English in Brussels, no doubt an unprecedented event in Belgium's political history. Whether they speak our national languages or not, all European citizens have the right to vote in the municipal elections. Moreover, in Brussels more than anywhere else in Europe, it is important they should be given the right to vote in regional elections. Consequently, "facilities" for Europe's lingua franca are a necessity in the political domain. This applies a fortiori in the administrative and educational realm.

But beware: whereas Europeans should be entitled to treat Brussels as their capital, they must not treat Belgium as their colony. Convergence towards one lingua franca is essential, but respect for the equal dignity of Europe's linguistic communities implies that one should recognize each of them the right to protect its language, in particular by demanding that anyone who wishes to take up permanent residence on its territory should muster both the cou-rage and the humility to learn the local language. This is especially true around Brussels. The linguistic territoriality principle is not an absurd "right of the soil". It is a legitimate request for newcomers not to behave like colonizers. It is easy to be blind to the legitimacy of this request when one's native language is a powerful language every newcomer learns spontaneously. When languages are unequal, however, the desire to communicate results in the strongest language gradually displacing the weakest one. Kindness between people is the instrument of language extermination. Consequently, the many foreign people drawn to Brussels by its international mission must feel welcome in its Flemish or Walloon periphery, but they must realise that they will have to go to the trouble of learning the official language of the Region that welcomes them. Should they find this obligation unacceptable, they should settle — be it somewhat less spaciously — within the bounds of their capital city.
Thus, the number of 'Europeans' in Brussels will keep growing, but they are not, and never will be, the only people living there. And it is essential to avoid their ending up living in a ghetto. If this is not to remain wishful thinking, what is to be done? A fourth large European School is due to open by 2010. It has been located, very sensibly, in Laeken. However it must be clear that it will be the last of its kind. What one needs to start creating, at kindergarten and primary level, is a network of schools open to all the children living in the same neighbourhood who now attend schools under the authority of the Vlaamse Gemeenschap, the Communauté française and the Board of Governors of the European Schools. This must be done in a way that will meet the special needs of the families of European civil servants and of the numerous other families who have moved to Brussels because of the European institutions, in a way that will make it possible to preserve and expand the powerful instrument for the spread of Dutch among Brussels children that the network of the Flemish Community has become over the past twenty years, and, finally, in a way that will effectively tackle the huge inequalities between schools — even more glaring in Brussels than elsewhere — in the French Community's network. This is by no means an easy task but it is an essential one, and one which the Brussels Region must be given the authority to tackle with all necessary competen-ces and resources, if we are to prevent the capital of Europe from degenerating into the capital of apartheid.

THE CHALLENGE FOR BELGIUM

So far we have concentrated on Brussels. But what about the rest of the country? Of course it depends on the future we expect it to have. It has not been be possible for the Brussels Capital Region to be annexed either by Flanders or by Wallonia and it never will be. Nor has it been possible for the Brussels Capital Region to be circumscribed so as to incorporate the bulk of its Brabant periphery, inclu ding, for example, Brussels Airport and Wavre-Louvain-la-Neuve, and it never will be. True, a sensible compromise will be able to trade — in the interest of all three Regions — the absorption into Brussels of some of the communes with linguistic facilities against the gradual phasing out of these facilities in the others and the acceptance of a toughening of the linguistic territoriality principle in Flanders and Wallonia. But this will not stop the capital city of Brussels from forming merely the large central neighbourhood of a far larger economic agglomeration that is shared with Flanders and Wallonia. This fundamental fact – it is far more difficult to move Brussels than the French section of Louvain University – relegates every separatist or confederal scenario to the realm of fantasy and guarantees that a federal Belgium will outlive us all. Nevertheless the Belgian federation can and must operate more effectively. Which is why we must continue to reform institutions, for example by creating a country-wide electoral constituency for some of the seats in the federal Parliament, and by refashio ning the distribution of competences between the federal state, the Regions and the Communities.

However, the task that lies ahead is also a linguistic one. For two neighbours to acquire a common third language is anything but a perfect substitute for each being proficient in his neighbour's language. The better the Walloons and the Flemings speak English, the less motivated they will be and the less opportunity they will have to speak the other national language. This merely illustrates a general obstacle that also renders unrealistic the European goal of 'Mother Tongue Plus Two', in a context in which one of the two foreign languages one is supposed to learn in addition to one's mother tongue is the same throughout the European continent. True, in Belgium, we have a good starting point. In the whole European Union (and possibly even the whole world) Flanders is by far the non-official-French-speaking area where French is spoken best (53.5% of all Flemings speak good or very good French, three times more than the Portuguese who come second in this respect). And Wallonia is even more clearly the non-official-Dutch-speaking area in which Dutch is spoken best (over thirty times better than in Germany, which comes second). However, as a result of the spread of English, the task is now more difficult than ever, especially in Wallonia. Even if the Walloons did not exist, the Flemings would still have good reason to learn French, whether to make themselves understood in Lille or Saint-Tropez, in Montreal or Kinshasa. By contrast, if the Flemings did not exist, it is not in order to read Max Havelaar or Joachim van Babylon in the original language that the Walloons would bother to learn Dutch, let alone to speak it with the Dutch, who now almost feel more comfortable speaking English than they do their own native language.

Let us not beat about the bush: in Belgium no less than in Switzerland, only a voluntaristic policy, combined with greater rigour in the enforcement of the linguistic territoriality principle on both sides, can facilitate progress or even simply prevent regression in the knowledge of the other national language. More important than the obligation to start with 'the neighbour's language' at school is the creation of the motivation and the opportunity to learn it by increasing contacts and by relying on the positive spiral this produces: multiplying contacts means discovering the pleasure of entering a world that is so close and yet so different; it also means discovering that learning to speak the other's language is a great privilege rather than a burden; and it means crushing a handful of simplistic prejudices that stand in the way of the desire to get to know one another better, learn from one another and work together.

Neither the Flemings nor the Walloons are likely to move away. They are therefore fated to live as neighbours until the end of time and, moreover, to share with the citizens of Brussels an agglomeration to which they owe, and will keep owing, much of their vigour. Consequently, in linguistic matters as in all others, we might as well make a virtue of necessity.

Figure 1-2-3:
Source: Eurobarometer 2006. Calculations: Jonathan Van Parys & Sven Wauters, FUSL.
Figure 4:
Source: Rudi Janssens, Taalgebruik in Brussel, VUB Press, 2001, p. 65.