

# **Brussels Capital of Europe: the linguistic challenge**

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## **Europe 's fast changing linguistic landscape**

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.

At the European level, there is one phenomenon that dwarfs all others : the explosive spread of English. According to the 2006 Eurobarometer data, the self-declared knowledge of English jumps from 24% to 59% as one moves from the older (65+) to the younger cohort (15-24). 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. 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, it still surpasses Dutch, 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.

## **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 Westvlaanderen, 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, 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 Jan Hertogen's estimates). 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.

## **Forestalling apartheid**

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. In particular, 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 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. "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 courage 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 spaciouly — 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 competences and resources, if we are to prevent the capital of Europe from degenerating into the capital of apartheid.