Language borders in northern France and in Belgium: A contrastive analysis

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1. Introduction

It is generally assumed that the Romance-Germanic language border was established in the 11th–12th centuries and has remained remarkably stable ever since (Gysseling, 1976). Yet, during the past eight centuries certain changes have nevertheless occurred. This paper will focus on the French–Dutch part of the Romance-Germanic border, which begins in the French "Département du Nord", between the towns of Graveline and Dunkerque and crosses Belgium until it reaches the Belgian-German state border.

2. Language borders

The notion of “language border” which is essential in this paper is very hard to define. As it is often the case with, e.g., the related notion of “dialect border”, one might even argue that language borders actually do not exist, since it is obvious that language areas are but seldom separated by a clear cut line. Usually, there is some kind of transitional zone between them and a demarcation line, therefore, will always have a somewhat arbitrary character. Moreover, it is obvious that in transition zones a social variable, rather than a geographic one, may be decisive for linguistic “affiliation”. Dialect-geographers are very familiar with these kinds of problems and to cope with them they tend to make use of a practical solution rather than a theoretical one, which may differ from one region to another. In this paper too, the various kinds of language contact under investigation will be decisive for the particular use which is made of the concept of “language border”.

Yet, both in a historical and a contemporary sense, it may be necessary to refer to what Goossens (1968) calls an “intuitive consensus” on language borders. In the case of French-Flanders e.g., there is a general consensus among scholars to consider the isogloss used in dialect-geographic studies
as “the” language border between the Romance and the Germanic dialects in the region (it is reproduced in, among others, Pée 1957). The same applies to Belgium up to 1963, the year in which the language border was laid down by law. In the latter case the notion of “language border” is used in a sociolinguistic sense, meaning that it separates two regions in which either Dutch or French are the official languages, disregarding any possible bilingual communication which may actually occur in the transition zone. From that time onward, the language border coincided with the border separating two administrative entities. According to which part of the Dutch-French area of transition or to which time in history I am referring to, the use of the language border concept will be one of those mentioned above.

As far as changes are concerned which are discussed in this paper, two essentially different types have to be discerned:

- language shift resulting in a change of the location of the border, meaning that places which used to be part of the transition zone have, in the course of time, definitely moved into the monolingual zone on either side of the border;
- language shift resulting in “erosion”, meaning that the contact situation has decisively been changed in the course of history although the “language border” (in the traditional sense) has not changed its course. Since in Belgium the constitutional notion of language border not only refers to the demarcation line between two monolingual territories but also to the demarcation line between a monolingual and an officially bilingual zone, “erosion” is also used to characterize a decisive change of the situation within bilingual zones.

Language borders in France and in Belgium appear to be very different devices as this contrastive analysis will reveal. Also, their fluctuations are brought about by specific patterns of shift which will be analyzed and compared.

3. France

Political change is a well documented initiator of language shift and is responsible for shift occurring along the western section of the French – Dutch language border in what is now known as French-Flanders ['Frans-Vlaanderen'; ‘la Flandre française’].

Part of what is now the north of France used to be an integral part of the province of Flanders, including such major cities as Lille, Douai, Cambrai, Arras, Calais, and Dunkirk. Centuries of tug-of-war resulted in a frequent shifting back and forth of parts of this territory between France and the Low Countries. From the 13th century onwards major parts of it were gradually integrated within the French language territory (Pée 1957).

3.1. Historical change

This paper will mainly concentrate on the so-called Westhoek, i.e. the Dutch speaking part of France in the “arrondissements” of Dunkirk (Dutch: Duinkerke; French: Dunkerque) and Hazebroek of the “Département du Nord”. Up to the time of annexation by France in the second half of the 17th century, this was a homogeneously Dutch speaking region, as was the rest of Flanders (Ryckboor 1990). From the very annexation onward France’s language policy initiated a progressive Frenchification of the administration (first Royal Decree in 1663) but the language of instruction remained Dutch until the end of the 18th century, albeit that only a small portion of the population received any instruction at all.

The first major change occurred as a consequence of the French Revolution, when the use of French was made obligatory in the school system, in local administration and in all official documents. The Jacobin philosophy that all power had to be concentrated in and to emerge from Paris could only be effective on a “one country, one language”-basis. Also, it was believed that French was the only language fit to propagate and spread the ideals of the French Revolution. Consequently, French had to supplant all national and regional “idioms”, especially (but not exclusively) within the borders of the Republic (De Jonghe 1967). Already in 1806, the major towns of Dunkirk and Gravelines (Grevelingen) appear to be intensely frenchedified, as can be seen from a linguistic inquiry carried out by Coquard et de Montbret. The same inquiry also reveals that in the Westhoek Dutch was still the language of everyday communication in all but 10 villages (Pée 1957).

The consequences of the French linguistic policy, intensified by a new educational policy gradually rendering (French) public instruction obligatory, were soon to be felt. An extensive inquiry in 1854 showed that both “arrondissements” of the Westhoek still comprised at least 27 villages where less than 10% of the population was French speaking. It also revealed that the importance of French increased the further one moved away from
the Belgian border and that Dutch was hardly ever used in print. The language having been prohibited in schools, the growing discrepancy between the spoken dialect and the written standard had become so wide that Dutch speaking French-Flemings were hardly capable of writing or even reading their language. Subsequent inquiries showed that by 1891 the whole, previously “bilingual”, territory appeared to be overwhelmingly French speaking (all figures in Pée 1957). Pée’s “Dialect atlas” (1946) provided very detailed information on the linguistic situation in almost every single village of French Flanders in the nineteen thirties. The overall conclusion was that “if the current industrialization is to continue, Dutch will ultimately be confined to a few villages along the Belgian border” (Pée 1957). And since industrialization intensified...

3.2. Present-day situation

Pée’s investigation was the last reliable source of information for the whole of the territory. The most important characteristic of recent evolution is not the shift of the language border anymore, but the erosion of Dutch within its confines. Nowadays the use of Dutch has indeed become so limited that inside France, a language border in the real sense of the word has ceased to exist (Ryckeboer, 1990). This does not mean that Dutch has completely vanished from the “Westhoek”, but we seem to be witnessing one of the ultimate stages of language death (Dorian 1982) as is revealed in recent inquiries. Although the following statistics were gathered in only three particular villages, it is generally assumed that they are typical for all the others where Dutch is still in limited use. Bilingual skills are available in some 50% of senior citizens and in 8 to 25% of those between 40 and 60 years of age. Of those between 20 and 40 years of age, some 3 to 9% are bilingual and among the youngsters up to 20 none is able to speak Dutch. In all categories the percentages for passive knowledge are somewhat higher (Ryckeboer 1977). Monolingual Dutch speakers are completely extinct and only a very limited number of senior citizens still have Dutch as their first language. Hence, it is impossible that the mastery of the language, or even its passive knowledge, may be handed down to the next generations. This view is supported by information on the domains and functions of Dutch. An investigation among high school students in Hondschote, a village just south of the Belgian border, reveals:

- that Dutch is occasionally used in 10% of the families and that about a third of the pupils are occasionally confronted with the language;
- that only 3 out of 118 interviewees claim to be as proficient in Dutch as in French, whereas this is apparently still the case with half of their fathers and one third of their mothers;
- that Dutch is no longer used to communicate with other youngsters; only some 5% of them are occasionally addressed in Dutch by their parents and all of them use French exclusively when talking to their parents, sisters and brothers;
- that 36% of the students’ grandparents speak French among each other, 38% use Dutch and 26% both languages;
- that the village café is the place where Dutch is most frequently used.

(Ryckeboer & Mæckelberghe 1987)

The only lasting consequence of the cultural heritage in these parts may lie in the field of foreign language acquisition: since Dutch is now again available as a subject in French schools and since also a considerable number of private Dutch classes have emerged during recent decades it may be assumed that French Flanders will produce more students of Dutch than other regions of France, where it is not part of the cultural heritage. In the foreseeable future this may be the only remnant of the Dutch past of that particular part of France.

3.3. Concluding remarks

Language shift in French Flanders seems to have been decisively influenced by the following characteristics:

a) Frenchification has been initiated by political events which have disconnected part of Flanders from the “motherland”. Consequently, the territory lost contact in a number of domains of which language is probably the most spectacular one.

b) The fact that, through annexation by France, the language in use in these parts had become “rootless” entailed functional as well as structural loss, and, hence, reduced its communicative value decisively.

c) Growing industrialization and a considerable internal migration (in both directions) firmly reduced the linguistic homogeneity of the region and, consequently, the useability of the minority language.

d) “Social integration” took care of the rest: mastery and usage of the majority language appear to be so indispensable for upward social mobility and social life in general that they easily overcome solidarity factors such as cultural and linguistic loyalty.
The combination of all these factors hardly ever allows for more than a short transitional period of bilingualism and/or diglossia. The minority language, structurally and functionally impoverished and no longer supported by innovating “injections” from a genetically related standard language, stands no chance against the domestic majority language and, thus, gradually vanishes.

3.4. Pattern of fluctuation

Therefore, the pattern of fluctuation for French Flanders is: loss of function and subsequent erosion of the language, mostly within the confinement of the borders, i.e. without major changes of the line which delimits the region in which Dutch “exists”.

4. Language border communities in Belgium

4.1. General observations

Although the language border has existed for centuries, no solid information prior to the 19th century is available as far as the territory of present-day Belgium is concerned.

In 1846, the recently established Kingdom of Belgium started censuses including a question on language usage and providing statistical information until 1947. For various reasons the information is mostly inaccurate: the exact wording of the questions was changed from one census to another and, more important still, two basic requirements for reliable information gathering, viz. honest intentions and scientific support, were hardly ever met (Gubin 1978).

The most important insight yielded by the first census (1846) is that the administrative division of the country into provinces, “arrondissements” and even communes had been carried out without taking into account the language border at all and had never intended to provide for more or less linguistically homogeneous administrative entities. Yet, the information enabled a language map to be drawn, showing a border line neatly separating the French (i.e. Walloon dialect) speaking and the Dutch (i.e. Flemish dialect) speaking communities. For almost one century there were no significant differences from one census to another (Martens 1975), a fact demonstrating the remarkable stability of Belgium’s linguistic communities.

4.2. The territoriality principle

A dramatic change occurred from 1932 onward, the year in which the language border became a political issue. A century of struggle by the Vlaamse Beweging ‘Flemish Movement’ (Ruys 1973) in favor of the promotion of Dutch in a country then dominated by Francophones had finally resulted in extensive linguistic legislation bringing about the de facto acceptance of the territoriality principle (McRae 1975), which implied that Flanders was to be governed exclusively in Dutch and Wallonia exclusively in French. To implement this decision, though, a precise legal description of the delimitation of these territories, in other words of the language border was needed. Although the 1932 law did not provide such a description it held a provision that communes with a linguistic minority of at least 30% were to be governed bilaterally and that, should a minority become the majority, the linguistic status of the commune was to change accordingly. This seems to be fair, were it not that the only means of acquiring the information needed was the census which thus, unfortunately, acquired important political significance.

The first census with these political implications was scheduled for 1940 but was postponed because of World War II and when in 1947 it was finally carried out it resulted in an outburst of political commotion. Contrasting heavily with the stability the returns had shown for more than a century, it appeared that this time not only notorious shifts were registered but that they all went in the same direction: many Dutch speaking villages appeared to harbor so many Francophones, that they turned into bilingual or even French speaking communes … (Martens 1975). Since fraudulent maneuvering by (local and/or national) authorities was so apparent, the Flemish reaction was extremely vigorous and the government was finally forced to skip language questions from future census questionnaires at all and to look for a political solution which might, once and for all, determine the language border between the communities.

A law to this effect came into being on September 1, 1963 and since its underlying philosophy was to produce linguistically homogeneous administrative entities, several adjustments had to be made, transferring 25 communes with 87,450 inhabitants from Flanders to Wallonia and 24 communes with 23,250 inhabitants from Wallonia to Flanders (Martens 1975).
4.3. Problem areas

Another provision of the 1963 law was the installment of communes with so-called “faciliteiten” [linguistic facilities], meaning that if a community harbored a considerable linguistic minority (on the date of September 1, 1963), provisions were to be made enabling this minority to communicate in its own language with communal authorities and to obtain limited possibilities for instruction in its own language. This status was allotted to a restricted number of communes on both sides of the language border. The major provision, though, meant to put minds at rest, was that after September 1, 1963, changes in the linguistic status of communes and provinces became virtually impossible. Almost everywhere this peace of mind was indeed brought about; two of the noted exceptions, the so-called “Voerstreek” and the Brussels suburban region (the so-called “Randgemeenten”) will now be treated in some more detail.

4.3.1. The Voerstreek

The “Voerstreek” is part of the so-called “Land van Overmaas”, a small territory situated between the major cities of Aachen (Germany), Maastricht (The Netherlands) and Liège (Wallonia, Belgium). During the “Ancien régime” Dutch was the language of instruction and administration in the whole Overmaas territory (Goossens 1975), but subsequently both a “Germanifying” and a “Frenchifying” tendency had become apparent. Also, it has always been nearly impossible to distinguish between “Dutch” and “German” dialects in the region, on the basis of purely linguistic criteria (Nelde 1979, 41).

After World War I, when the Eupen region, a former Prussian possession was annexed by Belgium, we see that in the 17 “Overmaas” communes we are in the presence of 3 different linguistic regimes (Goossens 1975):

a) the Eupen-Sankt Vith region which constitutes the officially German speaking part of Belgium (the so-called “Ostkantone”);

b) the so-called “Platdietse streek” (“Altbelieg”) where a Low German dialect is, or used to be spoken and where High German used to fulfill some culture language functions. Considerable Frenchification, though, resulted in French gradually taking over most of these functions, so much so that, at the moment the “Ostkantone” were officially delimited, “Altbelieg” did not become part of it, but was allocated to French speaking Wallonia instead.

c) the six communes of “de Voerstreek” which gained political celebrity and a wretched reputation during recent decades (Murphy 1988). Subject to both the Frenchification process, which affected the other communes in the region, and to Walloon immigration they turned out a linguistically mixed region with a small French speaking minority. For that reason the 1963 law transferred them from the Walloon province of Liège to the Flemish province of Limburg. However, because they are not geographically linked to the latter province and are dependent for various economic functions on Liège, part of its inhabitants were not happy with this transfer. This uncasiness has been exploited by Walloon activists, causing political commotion ever since. Yet, both Flemish determination and recent changes in the constitution which put the “Voerstreek” firmly under the authority of the autonomous government of Flanders seem to have lessened political tension a good deal. Wynants (1980) explains that even for autochthonous inhabitants, the established triglossic situation of old – Dutch dialect for informal communication; Standard Dutch in primary schools and in church; French in secondary education and part of the administration – was finally disturbed and eventually changed because of political attitudes.

4.3.2. The Brussels suburban region

Finally, the 1963 law affected the status of some suburbs in the Brussels region where the officially bilingual territory is restricted to 19 communes which together constitute Brussels as a political entity. Ongoing Frenchification of Brussels which is to be discussed below, affected some of its suburbs. Mostly because of emigration of French speakers some of these communes lost their former exclusively Dutch speaking character and pressure was put on consecutive governments to annex them to bilingual Brussels (Sieben 1993). Yet, surrendering to francophone demands was politically unfeasible and afterwards made constitutionally impossible. Some of these suburbs appeared to harbor not only important French speaking minorities but in a few cases even de facto majorities. Six of them, Drogenbos, Kraainem, Linkebeek, Sint-Genesius-Rode, Wemmel and Wezepkeoppem officially received a “faciliteiten”-system (De Witte 1975) but remained part of Flanders and consequently Dutch speaking. This way the risk of Francophone overspill to other than these 6 communes has been taken away and recent evolution shows a significant decrease of Francophone influence in all
of the hinterland communes. This was demonstrated in recent research by Deschouwer & Mariette (1993). The most recent constitutional change of 1993 provides for the split of the province of Brabant as from 1 January 1995, cutting the Brussels periphery for good from the capital itself. This will in the very near future bring to a conclusion a process which is to be discerned all along the language border, viz. the increasing homogeneity of the language territory through assimilation of minority language islands.

4.4. Pattern of fluctuation

Again, what we are witnessing in the “Voerstreek” and the Brussels hinterland is not so much a fluctuation of the language border, but an erosion within Flemish borders, due to the sociological mechanism of “upward social mobility and integration” and to Francophone immigration. The villages mentioned sub 4.2, on the contrary, are the only incidents of places really shifting from one community to the other.

5. Brussels

5.1. General observations

Language shift in Brussels, spectacular though it may have been, is also a shift not affecting the language border as such. Here too, the pattern of fluctuation shows an erosion within the Dutch linguistic territory eventually rendering a city which used to be part of Flanders a part entière into a bilingual city with Francophone dominance. From a judicial point of view, though, a shift did nevertheless occur, since Brussels changed its status from (de facto) monolingual Dutch into (de jure) bilingual. Therefore, the intriguing question is how to account for a shift so spectacular in so short a lapse of time. Some specific features of the Brussels situation should be listed:

- Brussels is situated some twelve kilometers north of the language border and, therefore, entirely within the Dutch language territory.
- It is the only part of Belgium without a formal geographical demarcation line between speakers of the two languages. Hence, the territoriality principle is not applicable and there is no way of determining the linguistic status of the individual inhabitant.

- As a result of a lasting and intense language contact situation it is even difficult to allot inhabitants of Brussels to a specific linguistic group. The absence of census figures and of a geographical demarcation between speakers of both tongues is a severe handicap for those eager to elicit figures on the numerical strength of the respective language groups (Mackey 1981). Brussels not only harbors Dutch and French speakers but also a large number of bilinguals as well. De Vriendt – Willemyns (1987) describe the varieties of Dutch and French theoretically at the disposal of at least 6 groups of speakers categorized according to their competence in various varieties of these languages. This explains why there is not and cannot be an answer to the apparently simple question of how many speakers are to be attributed to the Dutch or French speaking groups respectively. He portrays Brussels as a city of immense complexity involving not only linguistic background and competence but also attitudes, social status, job conditions, circumstances of discourse, feelings towards the interlocutor etc, in one word all of the sociolinguistic variables which are known to determine linguistic interaction in multilingual settings.

5.2. Language shift

Until the 19th century Brussels shared its linguistic fate with other Flemish cities. An important part of the social elite was bilingual and used French for most of the traditional culture language functions. The competence of the majority of the population was restricted to a Dutch dialect; other varieties of Dutch were only at the disposal of the few (Baetens Beardsmore 1971). This situation existed in most Flemish cities and there was neither a typological nor a quantitative difference between Brussels and cities like Antwerp, Ghent or Bruges.

Yet, since francification was stopped and eventually reversed in Flanders but not in Brussels, an explanation may only be found in factors specific to the Brussels situation.

5.2.1. Historical development

Ever since the Burgundian period in the 15th century, Brussels has been a capital and consequently the number of courtiers, noblemen, influential government officials and civil servants has always been greater than elsewhere. It is precisely in these groups of people that the influence (and usage) of
French has always been the most important; Frenchification after the annexation by France was more intensive here than elsewhere in Flanders, not the least by the presence of an influential group of French immigrants (Deneckere 1954);

After 1830, Brussels emerged as a symbol of Belgium and here the “one country, one language”-principle appeared to be more appropriate than elsewhere. The strongly centralized Belgian policy resulted in a disproportional high concentration of the country’s financial and industrial power in the Francophone “milieu” of the capital. Since power and wealth essentially derived from Walloon industry it is hardly surprising that the elite particularly favored this region and its language. At rather short notice Brussells became the centre of attraction to numerous immigrants from both the Dutch and the French speaking parts of the country. Flemish immigrants mostly consisted of lower-class and poor people, whereas Walloon immigrants mostly consisted of upper-working-class and middle-class people. The latter immediately fortified the Francophone population. As to the former: “the pressure from the top social stratum to adopt its French language filtered down through the middle-classes and from them into the ‘labour aristocracy’ of skilled workers, but generally stopping short at the lowest categories of service personnel and day labourers, made up to a large extent in the nineteenth century of Flemish immigrants to the capital” (Baetens Beardsmore 1990, 2). Consequently, until far into the 20th century being Flemish (and speaking Dutch) used to be associated with being poor or even being socially and culturally disadvantaged.

An additional handicap for both immigrant and autochthonous Dutch speaking “Brusselers” was that their first language was a dialect, i.e. a variety with very limited social prestige. Consequently, the majority of the lower middle and working classes tried to acquire mastery in the only language which appeared to make upward social mobility at all possible. Hence, the attractiveness of the French educational system was immense in a period of rapid development of mass education.

The unprofessional and fraudulent censuses in Brussels (Gubin 1978) showed an enormous increase of the “statistical” amount of allegedly French speaking inhabitants, and the judicial consequences of censuses were very real.

5.2.2. Linguistic legislation

An additional reason why the development in Brussels was different from Antwerp or Ghent was the fact that either most of the linguistic legislation did not apply to Brussels and had to be paid for by concessions intensifying the frenchification of the capital. This situation changed as soon as the major struggle in Flanders was over and the Flemish Movement could start paying attention to Brussels.

The turning point appears to have been when Flemings agreed to give up the advantages of their numerical majority in the country at large in favor of parity in administration for Brussels. This implies that Dutch speaking “Brusselers”, even after having become a minority group, are nevertheless allotted half of the civil servants in the administration of Brussels’ 19 communes. The number of high ranking city administrators has increased from 11.2% Dutch and 88.8% French speakers in 1963, over 28.1% against 71.9% in 1970 to 49.2% Dutch and 50.8% French speakers in 1979 (Willemyns 1992).

Several measures taken on the level of the national government guarantee Dutch speakers in Brussels a position on all kinds of levels, which they never could have exacted by virtue of their sole numerical strength. An eloquent example is to be found in the school system. Although the number of pupils in the Dutch school system had deteriorated in the nineteen fifties and sixties, a combination of measures accounts for a constant increase of the population of Dutch schools from the late seventies onward (Baetens Beardsmore 1990), as opposed to the decrease in the country at large and in French schools in Brussels in particular.

Other measures have entailed consequences which were completely unpredictable. The reinstalment of the so-called “freedom of the head of the family”, meaning that Dutch speaking families could choose French education for their children and vice versa was very much feared by supporters of the Dutch cause in Brussels who expected the language shift to be increased by it. Completely unexpectedly, it appears to be the “heads” of French speaking families who, to an ever increasing extent, use their “freedom” to choose Dutch education for their children. Consequently, pupils in the Dutch schools increasingly originate from linguistically mixed or homogeneously French speaking households, as is shown in the following chart, classifying the population of newcomers to Dutch schools in Brussels at the start of the 1991 school year:
During the last three decades Belgium’s economic center of gravity shifted towards Flanders. A dramatic industrial development turned this formerly agricultural territory into a highly industrialized region largely dominating the political, social and economic scene. At the same time the outdated industrial equipment of Wallonia was slowly breaking down, giving way to a serious economic recession. This influenced the cultural and linguistic balance of power and enabled Flemings to achieve more linguistically and culturally in recent decades than during the whole of the preceding century (Willemyns 1988, 1255). Dutch has, therefore, become the prestige language of the country and now the capital is following suit.

A second factor is that from the fifties onwards linguistic legislation was finally also implemented in Brussels. This and, as Bactens Beardsmore (1990, 5) points out, Flanders’ increasing economic resources enabled it to put up structures in Brussels which enabled “the individual to function as a unilingual. Schools, hospitals, welfare services, cultural instances, recreational facilities have all been set up to service either community in its own language. Hence the institutional pressures to Frenchification have been eliminated and ... the minority speakers were enabled to maintain their ethnononguistic identity. It enabled them also to profit maximally from the gain in prestige the language had acquired in the country at large. Brussels' French speaking community and its economically and socially leading strata realized that the most important and best paid jobs were only to be available for bilinguals and consequently made serious efforts to either learn the language or to reactivate the psychologically repressed knowledge they already had. The figures on school attendance mentioned before are proof in themselves. We may add that the population in Dutch elementary schools has increased by 89.4% during the last five years (Deprez & Wynants 1989) and that there are waiting lists for adult classes providing instruction in Dutch. Inquiries on attitudes also prove the increased prestige of Dutch and the importance attached to bilingual competence (De Vriendt & Willemyns 1987, 224–228).

Consequently, the current manifestation of linguistic prestige in Brussels is no longer to speak French, but to be competent in both the Dutch and the French standard languages and to propagate bilingualism as a core value.

An internal factor which has to be stressed is the shift in linguistic behavior and attitudes away from dialects in the direction of the standard language. Among supporters of the Dutch cause there has always been a general awareness that meeting the French challenge was only possible by increasing the importance and usage of Standard Dutch, the only variety able to equal the social prestige of French. This awareness was particularly strong among inhabitants of the bilingual Brussels region. Research has demonstrated that here the shift from Dutch dialects to Standard Dutch started earlier and has been more massive than elsewhere in Flanders (De Vriendt – Willemyns 1987, 224–225). This factor is to be added to those mentioned before and is to be considered one of the most important contributions from the Dutch speaking “Brusselers” themselves to the dramatic change of the Brussels linguistic scene.

### 5.2.3. Reversing language shift (RLS)?

A dramatic development that also needs to be considered is the so-called Reversing Language Shift (RLS). This is not a new development, since linguistic legislation in Brussels was already put in place in the fifties, and the behaviour of ‘mixed’ families with children attending nursery schools and elementary schools has shown that, with Dutch having lost its prestige, it is possible for bilinguals to learn the language in the home environment and to have Dutch as a ‘minority’ language.

The most striking figures are those concerning the learning of Dutch by ‘other language’ families. The following table shows the percentages of children learning Dutch as their first language in nursery schools and elementary schools.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nursery Schools</th>
<th>Elementary schools</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>homogeneously Dutch speaking families</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>linguistically mixed families</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>homogeneously “other language” families</td>
<td>38%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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### 6. Typology of language border change

The analysis of these various and differing instances of language shift will help us to explain our initial assumption concerning the “language border” concept. History shows that demarcation lines between dialects of different languages can remain remarkably stable over centuries, but also that changes in the political and/or social constellation may account for dramatic alterations leading to language shift and eventually language loss. The point that I would like to emphasize is that only conscious or semi-conscious language planning initiatives may bring about durable, irreversible change. Planned political interference of various kinds (and linguistic legislation is only one of them) accounts for a process of socially determined shift, resulting in language erosion on one side of the language border and eventually in complete loss. Since language planning initiatives may be of a contradictory nature – either to encourage the “offensive” language or to support the “defensive” one – political and sociological factors will decisively determine the eventual outcome. The fact that language planning methods in France and in Belgium are so completely different in nature will help us to clarify the matter.
6.1. The French type

France is an officially monolingual country where French is the only official language. Ever since the French Revolution constant and determined pressure has been put on the “allophone” regions to accommodate, both officially and privately, to the official policy. This had led to a massive shift of which French Flanders has been no exception. As a consequence of the monolingual assumptions of the central government language borders were neither protected nor was their mere existence accepted in any legal or official way and so there has been no official protection or even function for Dutch in France; its usage has, on the contrary, constantly been fought and banned. Consequently it has deteriorated almost to the point of complete extinction, emptying the still existing “language border” of almost all practical relevance nowadays. Yet, even in this very restricted sense the language boundary has considerably shifted in a northern direction over the last two centuries. A quantitatively and qualitatively very restricted form of bilingualism and/or diglossia, and what Dorian (1982) calls “semi-speakers” is all that has survived the aggressive language planning activities (viz. linguistic legislation and social pressure) devised by the French government and establishment.

6.2. The Belgian type

The evolution in Belgium is completely different, mainly because of a very different historical evolution:

- Prior to 1794 (annexation to France) there has never been a consistent linguistic policy (mainly because there has never been a central government!)
- Both the French (up to 1814; Deneckere 1954) and the King of the “United Netherlands” (from then till 1830; De Jonghe 1967) legislated on linguistic matters in the “one country – one language”-sense, be it with completely different intentions
- The “founding fathers” of independent Belgium meant to appease linguistic unrest by constitutionally declaring “the use of the languages as optional”. In a nation dominated by an industrialized and powerful Walloon part and a mainly French speaking Flemish bourgeoisie this meant the perpetuation of the dominance of French over the majority, i.e. the Dutch speaking, yet politically powerless Flemings. During all this time the internal language border between Dutch and French continued to exist practically unchanged and unchallenged since it was simply an informal line on dialectologists’ maps having no official or political implications whatsoever. The struggle of the so-called Flemish Movement for cultural and linguistic rights for Dutch speakers gradually changed the picture. Bitterly debated, yet only gradually implemented linguistic legislation resulted, in the nineteen thirties, in the de facto acceptance of the principle of territoriality legally acknowledging the existence of language communities. The next step, consequently, had to be the official delimitation of these communities, in other words the official determination of the language border. Subsequent constitutional reforms finally transformed Belgium into a federal state with regional governments having extensive legislative power within their territories confined by language borders. These borders were laid down in the constitution and made virtually unchangeable. Consequently each Belgian town or village has been allocated a specific linguistic status and the official language of each individual is not a matter of personal choice but of the territory one lives in.

6.3. Patterns of change

The changes that have occurred can be divided into different types or patterns:

a) “monolinguＡlization” of formerly bilingual or bicultural villages as is the case of some of the language border communities;
b) “bilingualization” of formerly mostly monolingual villages, i.e. “Frenchification”, e.g. in the border villages of Brussels, some of which have indeed been annexed to the Brussels bilingual community;
c) a specific evolution in Brussels itself, mainly of the type mentioned in b).

Political evolution in recent decades has stabilized the language border and made drastic changes virtually impossible in the future. It appears that:

- changes have become “definitive” over time mainly by securing the linguistic homogeneity of administrative entities;
- ongoing shift has been frozen by firmly embedding shifting villages into a monolingual community. Recent investigations have shown that Frenchification not only seems to have stopped but is being slowly reversed (Deschouwer – Mariette 1993).
As a result we are now in the presence of a firmly monolinguallized Belgium, divided into autonomous communities based on linguistic homogeneity and determined to reduce the political consequences of language contact at their borders to a strict minimum. In so doing the language border has become the most important internal boundary to which all preexisting administrative delimitations were subordinated. The only interesting place left from a linguistic point of view is Brussels. The principal of territoriality does not apply here, there is no official demarcation line between speakers of both languages and no way of officially controlling language contact or potential shift either. Recent evolution shows the ever growing importance of Dutch in Brussels, along with the fact that bilingualism is gradually evolving into a core value, a feature increasingly valued as distinguishing the specific functioning of the capital’s multilingual community.

7. Conclusions

In Belgium at large a language border is no longer a mere linguistic notion but an administrative and political reality. This evolution has completely changed the nature of the coexistence of the country’s various linguistic communities and has also demonstrated how decisive the implications of language planning activities can be.

Centralism in France has led to a rapidly growing monolinguallization through the relentless assimilation of linguistic minorities. Federalization has achieved the same in Belgium, where the two communities are firmly embedded in their own monolingual structures.

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