

# België or la Belgique?

## Roland Willemyns *looks at the changing linguistic make-up of Belgium and its bilingual capital city*

With about 11 million inhabitants, Belgium is a trilingual, federal country consisting of four entities constituted on the basis of language: Dutch-speaking Flanders (58 percent of the population), French-speaking Wallonia (31.4 percent), bilingual Brussels (10 percent) and a small German-speaking community (0.6 percent). Since regional governments have legislative power, the frontiers of their jurisdiction – being language borders – are defined in the constitution.

The ‘language struggle’, which was to dominate Belgian political life, started in 1830 after the split of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands into present-day Holland and Belgium. Although the new constitution provided for ‘linguistic freedom’, this freedom was only profitable to the rich and powerful – ie, the aristocracy and bourgeoisie from Wallonia and Flanders, all of whom were French speakers. Hence, despite the fact that Dutch speakers constituted the huge majority

of the population, no legal means was provided for their language.

A century of struggle by the Flemish Movement in favour of the promotion of Dutch finally resulted in extensive linguistic legislation, bringing about the acceptance of the ‘territoriality principle’, which implied that Flanders was to be governed exclusively in Dutch, and Wallonia exclusively in French. Two sets of laws in 1932 and 1963 officialised the language frontier as a domestic administrative border and made it virtually unchangeable.

Revisions of the constitution in 1970 and 1980 provided for a considerable amount of self-determination for the linguistically divided parts of the country, and subsequent changes in 1988 and 1993 finally turned Belgium into the federal country it is. Thanks to the 2013 revision of the constitution, the economic and financial weight of the state governments for the first time supersedes that of the federal government.

There were two notorious exceptions to the territoriality principle: the so-called ‘Voerstreek’ (a small territory situated between the major cities of Aachen, Maastricht and Liège), and the Brussels suburban region (Randgemeenten). Whereas the problems in and with the Voerstreek were solved some time ago, the Brussels suburban region continued to be a nuisance for consecutive Belgian governments.

The 2013 revision of the constitution finally separated the Halle-Vilvoorde area from Brussels. This brings to a conclusion a process which, through extensive language planning and policy, guarantees the homogeneity of



### FLEMISH REGION

*Antwerp City Hall on the main square*





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Belgium's various language territories. The discord that still exists between Flanders and Wallonia no longer has very much to do with the linguistic contention. The only remaining and very important obstacle is Brussels. In the capital, there is no geographical demarcation of Dutch and French speakers, so the 'personality principle' is the only possible one.

### Bilingual Brussels

The Belgian capital has turned into a bilingual city, although it is located entirely within the Flemish region. The portrait of Brussels is one of immense complexity, involving not only linguistic background and competence but also attitudes, social status, job conditions, circumstances of discourse, feelings toward the interlocutor etc – all of the sociolinguistic variables that are known to determine linguistic interaction in multilingual settings.

The 'Frenchification' of the city started in the 18th century and developed considerably during the 19th century. Immigration of French and Walloons played a part, but the decisive factor was the Frenchification of considerable parts of the indigenous population and of Flemish immigrants. Also, between 1830 and 1840 the population quadrupled.

Flemish immigrants mostly consisted of lower-class and poor people, whereas Walloon immigrants were mostly upper-working-class and middle-class. The latter immediately boosted the Francophone population, while the majority of the former tried to acquire mastery in the only language that appeared to make upward social mobility possible. Hence, the French educational system was immensely attractive in a period of rapid development of mass education. This continued to be the case until after the middle of the 20th century.

Although the number of pupils in the Dutch school system had deteriorated in the 1950s and 1960s, a combination of measures accounts for a constant increase of the population of Dutch schools from the late 1970s onward. This happened at a time when there was a decrease of the school population in the country at large, and in French schools in Brussels in particular.

French-speaking families started increasingly to choose Dutch education. Consequently, pupils in Dutch schools originate more and more from linguistically mixed or homogeneously French-speaking households.

Also, as Hugo Baetens Beardsmore points out,<sup>1</sup> Flanders' increasing economic resources made it possible to put up structures in Brussels that enabled 'the individual to function as a monolingual. 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 speaker [is enabled] to maintain his ethnolinguistic identity.' It enabled them also to profit maximally from the gain in prestige the language had acquired in the country at large.

### Safeguards

It was only after World War II that serious efforts were made to safeguard Brussels' bilingual status and to secure the rights of the Dutch-speaking population, which had become a minority. Measures to slow down Frenchification started in the early 1960s, not so much through local regulations but mainly by linguistic legislation on the level of the national Belgian legislator.

### DIVIDED CAPITAL

*Inside the Flemish Parliament building in Brussels*

The turning point appears to have been when Flemings agreed to give up the advantages of their numerical majority in favour of parity in administration for Brussels. Dutch-speaking Brusselers, even after having become a minority group, were thereby allotted half of the high-ranking civil servants in the administration of Brussels' 19 communes.

A rapidly expanding population of foreign origin accounts for the fact that none of Belgium's languages is the mother tongue of more than one third of its citizens. For the overwhelming majority of them, French is their first 'Belgian' language, but in recent decades, non-native Brusselers are making enormous efforts to acquire proficiency in Dutch.

### Nationwide issues

The importance and use of English is rapidly growing nationwide, and in business many important positions are occupied by people who are proficient in English, French and Dutch – most of them native Dutch speakers.

In the last 50 years, there has been a shift in the nature of Belgium's language struggle. From the late 1950s, Flanders was transformed from an agricultural territory into a highly industrialised region, dominating the national political, social and economic scene. At the same time, the outdated industrial equipment of Wallonia was slowly breaking down, giving way to an economic recession from which it has never recovered.

The border between Wallonia and Flanders ceased to be a mere linguistic one, and Belgium's language problems were replaced by so-called 'community problems'. The issue has always been intertwined with social and political factors, and has never been an exclusively linguistic one.

Roland Willems' *Dutch: Biography of a Language* (2013) is published by Oxford University Press.

### Notes

1 Baetens Beardsmore, H, 1990, *Bilingualism in Education: Theory and practice*, Brussels, VUBPress

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