On linguistic territoriality
and Belgium’s linguistic future

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“Au départ, l’idée était que beaucoup de francophones allaient s’adapter à la nouvelle réalité linguistique. Mais apparemment les francophones ne sont pas en état intellectuel d’apprendre le néerlandais”. This is at least what Yves Leterme, then Minister-President of Flanders and future federal Prime Minister, is supposed to have told the French daily Libération.1 This memorable statement triggered a polemic whose intensity was not proportioned to its pretty trivial real substance, but quite symptomatic of what is probably the most emotional aspect of the conflict between Belgium’s communities: Can what is commonly called the linguistic territoriality principle — or, less charitably, the droit du sol — be imposed on the Francophones who settle, or already live, in Flanders, and in particular in the part of Flemish Brabant that surrounds Brussels? I happen to believe that such a linguistic territoriality principle is justified, but also that its justification is not self-evident. In order to understand why it is justified one needs both to understand how interaction in multilingual societies is governed by what I call the maxi-min dynamics and to appeal to a conception of social justice that integrates a dimension of equal dignity.2

1. For territoriality: equal dignity and social cohesion

The maximin-dynamics consists in the explosive interaction of two micro-mechanisms. One is probability-sensitive learning: the higher the probability with which one practices (and expects to practice) a language, the more quickly and thoroughly one learns it. The other micro-mechanism is maxi-min language choice: the language that systematically tends to be picked for communication in a context of linguistic diversity is not the language of the

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majority nor the language best known on average, but the language best known by the conversion partner who knows it least well. To illustrate: if three Flemings and a Francophone are having a conversation, they are most likely to speak French because the person who knows French least well (one of the Flemings) knows it better than the person who knows Dutch least well (the Francophone) knows Dutch. But imagine a Swede joins the group, with an excellent knowledge of Swedish and English, but little knowledge of French and none of Dutch. Now communication is most likely to switch abruptly to what has become the maxi-min language in this new context: as even the Francophone can be expected to know English far better than the Swede knows French, it is now English that is “best known by the conversation partner who knows it least well” and will therefore be spontaneously chosen in order to minimize exclusion. Once the power of this dynamics is recognized, people on both sides of Belgium’s linguistic divide should understand that the possible sources of Belgium’s deeply asymmetric bilingualism are not exhausted by the alternative suggested in Yves Leterme’s pronouncement. If it is not the Francophones’ intellectual incapacity that accounts for their linguistic incompetence, he insinuated, it can only be their arrogant bad will. It is, however, a third factor, the powerful yet diffuse operation of the maxi-min dynamics, that is the chief factor that helps create the asymmetry and that locks us in it. Sharing this insight should at one and the same time induce Flemings to show more understanding for the Francophones’ overall mediocre knowledge of Dutch and induce Francophones to have more understanding for the Flemings’ insistence on linguistic coercion.

The latter understanding will only be forthcoming, however, if there is in addition a better perception of the connection between a territorially differentiated coercive linguistic regime and justice understood as equal dignity. In my book, I argue for the strength of this connection by emphasizing three channels: (1) such a regime inhibits “colonial attitudes” towards the local population, (2) it prevents the “kindness-driven agony” of the more vulnerable language, and (3) it secures a key background condition for offering each tongue the option of being “a queen”, i.e. of playing the role of the public language of a political community. My objective here is not to rehearse this argument but to clarify and defend my case for linguistic territoriality in the light of some useful objections and misunderstandings and to spell out its implications for the linguistic future of the Belgian federation.

By definition and in contrast to an accommodating regime, a territorially differentiated coercive linguistic regime (or, for short, a territorial regime) is a set of rules that constrains the choice of the language to be used in public communication and public education within a given territory. What the rules that make up such a regime should stipulate is necessarily context-specific. A concern for justice as equal dignity requires coercive rules that are sufficiently powerful to stabilize a vulnerable language against displacement through the operation of the “maxi-min dynamics”. But how much coercion is needed and in what form in

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3 This maxi-min dynamics, whose understanding is essential to the justification of territorial regimes and to the discussion of linguistic justice issues generally, is briefly explained in Van Parijs, *The Linguistic Territoriality Principle: Right Violation or Parity of Esteem*, Brussels: Re-Bel e-book n°11, § 2 and extensively discussed in *LJ* §§ 1.3-1.7.

4 See Van Parijs, *The Linguistic Territoriality Principle: Right Violation or Parity of Esteem*, Brussels: Re-Bel e-book n°11, §§4-5 and, more systematically, *LJ* §§ 5.3-5.5.
order to achieve this is highly sensitive to the particular context. Very little, if anything, is needed to stabilize French in Wallonia, for example, as long as most of the people who settle there come with a significant prior knowledge of French and face an environment in which competence in French is close to a survival condition given how few Walloons can communicate smoothly in any language but French. Far more is needed in a context — familiar enough to anyone acquainted with the Flemish core of Belgium’s language quarrels — in which settlers have hardly any prior knowledge of the local language and can rely on a high level of competence of the local population in their own native language. There is no need to coerce people into doing what they do spontaneously. For this reason, the degree of coerciveness of the rules that make up a justifiable territorial regime can vary widely.

As I understand it, a territorial regime does not necessarily consist in protecting a single language in every territory. There is a territorial regime in place in the Brussels Region for example, admittedly not one that protects Dutch against French, but one that protects both against, say, Arabic (the Region’s second mother tongue, after French, in the younger generations) or against English (the second best known language, after French, in all generations except the oldest): you cannot get administrative documents, public education or political participation in Arabic, for example, even if numbers would seem to justify it: there are after all more Arabophones in half a dozen Brussels communes than Germanophones in the nine communes of Belgium’s German-speaking Community. Thus, how coercive (i.e. non-accommodating) a language regime is and should be is a matter of degree along many dimensions, one of them simply being the number of languages that are being protected by the regime. In most cases, there is only one, but there can in principle be more.

In all cases, however, a territorial regime, as I understand it, stops short of regulating private communication. It must therefore be clearly distinguished from linguistic homogeneity and even more from exclusive monolingualism at the individual level. It is perfectly compatible not only with the preservation of languages distinct from the official language, but also with the encouragement of their intergenerational transmission and of thriving cultural activities using those languages. Consequently, even a territorial regime protecting a single official language is perfectly compatible with a sensible interpretation of the European convention on minority rights. It can in principle countenance not only tolerance for linguistic diversity but even public support for it, for example through the subsidizing of cultural life in non-official languages (say, Francophone associations or Arabophone libraries) or through the use of some of them as a medium of teaching in part of the curriculum (as in so-called immersion schools). What matters is only that the regulation of public education and public communication should sufficiently constrain the maxi-min dynamics so as to secure universal competence in the common official language.

5 LJ §5.1

6 A territorial regime shaped by considerations of this type is perfectly consistent with the removal of some silly features of Belgium’s current linguistic regime, such as the obligation to write all road signs, including those carrying the names of towns, in the official language of the region in which the sign stands. It is about time that one should start writing all over the country “Antwerpen” (rather than “Anvers”), “Liège” (rather than “Luik”), “Leuven” (rather than “Louvain”), “Tournai” (rather than “Doornik”) etc. This would not only help reduce confusion, mockery and irritation among foreign travellers. Calling a town by the name it is given in the mother
As mentioned above, my fundamental argument in favour of such a regime rests on a conception of justice as equal dignity. However, some, such as Jan Velaers\(^7\) consider that there is another objective just as important as equal dignity as “a foundation of the territoriality regime in our times”. I entirely agree with him about the importance of this objective, prominent, for example in a number of court decisions which he rightly quotes with approval against an overenthusiastic celebration of linguistic diversity. It is extremely important to ensure that people actively sharing a territory should also actively share a language. If people cannot talk to each other, democratic participation cannot be effectively institutionalized, nor can opportunities be equalized among citizens from all linguistic groups or feelings of solidarity develop across ethnic boundaries. It is precisely for reasons of “social cohesion” in this sense that I emphasize universal access to proficiency in the official language as a condition for the legitimacy of a territorial regime.\(^8\)

Such reasons, distinct from equal dignity, may provide more than we need as a justice-based rationale for the coercive protection of the local language in a context in which the latter competes with “weaker”, low-status immigrant languages. But this justification is more problematic in contexts such as the one that serves as the central illustration in my book — the worldwide dominance of English — where the conflict is with a stronger, high-status language that holds the potential of becoming, beyond a more or less awkward transition period, a language shared by the whole population. No doubt the social cohesion of Ireland or of French Flanders, for example, owes far more to the local populations’ shared knowledge of English and French, respectively, than to whatever little Gaelic or Flemish they are still able to speak. It is therefore not always true that the binding idiom “cannot be anything other, at the national or regional level, than the language that has traditionally been spoken in a given area”.\(^9\)

In the Belgian context, a concern for social cohesion can be persuasively invoked in order to justify the learning of French or Dutch by immigrants from all over the world, but not so easily to justify the learning of Dutch by Francophones or Anglophones who could easily get away with living in Flanders without learning any Dutch and communicating with locals in French or in English. If left unconstrained, such a sociolinguistic pattern would accelerate the learning by locals of these languages. It would lead to universal proficiency in the stronger non-local language after a transitional process that may prove somewhat chaotic but does not even need to be that long if backed by a facilitating set of policies in matters of migration, language use and education. Moreover, this alternative way of pursuing social cohesion would have the advantage of achieving it on a higher scale. This is unwittingly pointed out by Van


\(^{8}\) LJ §§ 5.5 & 6.7.

when he suggests that the territorial regime put into place in the 1930s created a pressure towards a decentralization of competences to linguistically defined entities, that it thereby triggered the breakup of Belgium’s unitary state and that it may even have sown the seeds of eventual separation.

Unity is not an aim in itself, and therefore the fact that territorially differentiated coercive regimes generate centrifugal tendencies supplies no knockdown argument against them. My point is here simply that social cohesion considerations only offer a contingent and qualified support to the linguistic territoriality principle. Appeal to some other consideration is needed if we are to justify protecting a weaker language against a stronger one that offers a realistic potential of generating social cohesion on a higher scale, as French did for example for the initially very multilingual territory of the French Republic, and as some hoped for quite a while it would do just as thoroughly for the Kingdom of Belgium.

2. Against territoriality: democracy and pacification?

Perhaps the most common objection made against the so-called linguistic territoriality principle is that it is “undemocratic”. 11 Democracy, in my view, is an instrument in the service of justice. Among the millions of ways in which a democracy — thinly defined by the conjunction of universal suffrage, majority rule and free voting — could be organized, one must select those that are most conducive to the realization of justice duly specified. 12 This justifies a resolute choice for a deliberative (as opposed to an aggregative) conception of democracy. Hence, democracy is to be conceived and shaped as the framework of a deliberative process that transforms preferences in order to produce substantively just decisions, rather than as the best feasible tool for revealing pre-existing individual preferences or interests for public goods broadly defined, aggregating them and satisfying them as well as possible.

An optimal democratic design, from such a standpoint, cannot be one that lets each neighbourhood or each municipality decide what its linguistic regime is going to be any more than what its tax regime is going to be, though for significantly different reasons. Letting the dwellers of each portion of a territory regularly decide by a simple majority what its linguistic regime is going to be would turn any linguistic regime into an accommodating regime, be it with an inbuilt time lag. By contrast, what a territorial regime amounts to doing is make it


12 This conception of democracy is presented, defended and illustrated in Ph. Van Parijs, Just Democracy: The Rawls-Machiavelli Programme, Colchester, ECPR Press, 2011.
realistic to expect that people who settle in the territory concerned will have the courage and humility to learn the local language. If they do not muster this courage or humility and simply wait for their numbers to grow until they manage to twist democratically the local linguistic regime in an accommodating direction, whatever contribution a territorial regime may make to justice as equal dignity is being undermined.

Border fixity is therefore essential to the territorial principle. As the institution of a territorial regime is not driven by some absurd “right of the soil”, there is an unavoidable arbitrariness in the drawing of the border, but the systematic shifting of this border as the outcome of local democratic decisions or linguistic censuses must be ruled out. By no means does it follow — it hardly needs saying — that democracy has no role to play. But the borders and their fixity must be part of a deal democratically adopted on a higher scale, guided by a conception of justice that incorporates equal dignity and enlightened by a lucid analysis of how the maxi-min dynamics threatens this equal dignity in a context of linguistic inequality. Some will protest that such a set up would be “less democratic” than one that leaves it up to each local entity to determine its linguistic regime. I am perfectly willing to concede this. But as I argue at length elsewhere and as a little bit of reflection should make plain, optimal democracy and maximal democracy are far from being one and the same thing.

Another, less frequent objection is that a territorial regime is a threat to peace. Given that many places are multilingual, drawing a linguistic border is likely to be contentious and can lead to sharp linguistic conflict. I shall certainly not deny that drawing such borders can be tricky, and I devote quite a bit of space to this issue in my book. Temporary linguistic facilities and a firm commitment on the part of the local linguistic majority to make proficiency in the official language accessible to all local children growing up with a different mother tongue are necessary but often not quite sufficient conditions for securing peace (as well as justice) in the many situations in which no clean cut is possible.

However, I cannot see how anyone could deny that in Belgium, as in many other places in the world, the sometimes painful and laborious introduction of a territorial regime has done

13 The reason for the rules needing to be determined on a higher scale is not that those in power at the higher level are intrinsically more able to be guided by a sense of justice, but because the territoriality principle is in the first instance about what can be legitimately expected from people settling in a particular area, and leaving up to the settlers to decide by themselves (albeit after a time lag) what can be expected from themselves would amount to pulverizing the rules which my equal-dignity-based arguments sustain are justified.


16 LJ §§5.12-5.13.
much to achieve lasting pacification. Some may deplore that a coercive territorial regime put an end to the accommodation of Francophone minorities in Flemish cities. But they cannot deny that the linguistic situation quickly became more peaceful there than in those places where an accommodating regime survived, in particular in Leuven owing to the presence of the country’s main Francophone university (until the late 1960s) and all around Brussels owing to the lack of fixity of the linguistic border (until the early 1960s), to the preservation of limited electoral and judiciary facilities in a large part of Flemish Brabant (until the splitting of the B-H-V district) and to the concession of more extensive administrative and educational facilities in six suburban communes? As illustrated more than established by Belgium’s linguistic history, lasting pacification is a welcome likely consequence of a well-designed territorial regime. But this fact, if verified, is not central to my argument. The foundation on which the latter rests is justice as equal dignity. For peace cannot be bought at the expense of justice. Justice is the most fundamental value.

3. Brussels big or Belgium strong

One chief conclusion usually drawn in the Belgian context by those who believe in the legitimacy of the linguistic territoriality principle is that the bilingual Region of Brussels-Capital cannot expand. This conclusion is ingeniously challenged by Alain Maskens, the author of a couple of books in which he persuasively pleads for a non-ethnic Brussels identity. Maskens does not contest the importance of taking seriously, in the Belgian context, the equal dignity of communities defined by their linguistic identities nor that this justifies a territorial regime. However, he insists that equal dignity is also owed to people defined by their regional identities, and he suggests that a meaningful compromise between these two concerns could take the form of a nested combination, whereby the regional border would be comfortably expanded in the light of “rigorous analyses” preferably entrusted to “independent international experts”, while the present language borders would remain unaltered inside this expanded region.

Whether or not it makes sense to frame them, as Maskens does, in terms of “linguistic justice” versus “regional justice”, there are two conflicting sets of sensible considerations pulling in opposite directions here. On the one hand, for the sake of linguistic justice as equal dignity, the borders of the relevant territories are prima facie best established so as to maximize, among the citizenry residing in a territory, the proportion of native speakers of the language picked as its official language, while minimizing the proportion of non-native


speakers of that language. However, there is no a priori reason why such borders thus drawn optimally from a linguistic point of view, should also be the borders best suited for the devolution of the widest range of policy competences to decentralized entities. An efficient exercise of competences in matters of mobility, public health, town planning or taxation, for example, may be incompatible with a high level of decentralization to entities with borders drawn according to linguistic criteria. Maskens argues that this is blatantly the case in the Brussels metropolitan area, and no urban economist or geographer looking at Belgium from abroad needs much time to reach exactly the same conclusion.20

In order to avoid perversely inefficient decentralization, it has therefore repeatedly been proposed to expand the bilingual Brussels region far beyond its current borders so that it can include most, if not all, its metropolitan region, including the communication hubs and intellectual centres of Leuven and Ottignies-Louvain-la-Neuve. Most of the people making such proposals are Francophones. This is not only, I believe, because any sensible expansion on these grounds would bite far more into Flanders than into Wallonia. This is also because many Francophones simply fail to realize how much of an attrape-nigauds such an enlargement would be from the Flemish standpoint, even though it can be correctly presented as a relative equalization of the proportion of Dutch-speakers and French-speakers in the enlarged Brussels. What they overlook (or sometimes pretend to overlook) is that within the boundaries of this larger area, once made bilingual, the maxi-min dynamics would work at the expense of the weaker language in essentially the same way as in the smaller area of the current Brussels region. The process may be slower than in the past because the gap between the respective social statuses of the two languages has narrowed in recent decennia. But it will be no less inexorable because of the lock-in nature of the maxi-min dynamics against the background of massively asymmetric bilingualism at the start. Those who seriously propose such a straightforward expansion of the bilingual Brussels region have not learned the lessons of the acute linguistic conflicts that exploded in the 1960s around the Brussels and Leuven “oil stains”, nor understood why fixed language borders, as already mentioned, are crucially important for linguistic justice as equal dignity.

Such a reproach does not apply to Alain Maskens’s proposal of expanding Brussels to a metropolitan area, say, four to six times larger without a matching shift in the language border.21 This is an original proposal that is worth pondering about. The best way of motivating it is by asking how best to decentralize political authority in a linguistically diverse country. On the one hand, the democratic imperative favours an option that maximizes the extent to which politics can function in the first or best language of the bulk of the people — and hence a coincidence between regional and appropriately drawn linguistic

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borders. On the other hand, concern for an efficient handling of interdependencies favours an option that brings under the same authority areas that are linked by a dense set of positive and negative externalities — and hence, in the Brussels case, for regional borders that reach far beyond the linguistic borders. The current situation approximates the former option (with the six communes with facilities as the main deviation), while Maskens advocates the latter. Each of these options is in principle consistent with an equal-dignity case for a territorial regime, and each has its own advantages and drawbacks.

The main advantage of Maskens’s proposal is that it would be possible to go much further in the devolution process, because the sizes of cross-regional externalities, while still far from insignificant, would be less massive and ubiquitous under his proposal than they unavoidably are when one of the regions is just a city or even, as in the Brussels case, the central neighbourhood of a larger urban area. Keeping Brussels as tiny as it is now not only makes it necessary to keep Belgium alive. It means that we shall have to keep a federal Belgian state with far more substance than we could otherwise get away with.22

For those who are sensitive to the many advantages of decentralization, both general and specific to linguistically diverse countries, this is a major drawback of the current small-Brussel option and a major advantage of Maskens’ alternative. Yet, as things stand in the 21st century, the latter is a non-starter. In large measure because the Brussels francophonie could not be trusted to do what Maskens proposes, namely grant territorial protection to the Dutch language in the bulk of Brussels’ hinterland, the dissolution of Belgium’s unitary state has involved the attribution to the other two regions of 95% of the old province of Brabant, the wealthiest area of Belgium since its inception and now more than ever. Owing to the ejection of the UCL from Leuven and to other aspects of the linguistic protection of the Flemish vicinity of Brussels, Brabant wallon has now emerged, along with Vlaams Brabant, as the (per capita) richest province in the country. At the same time, as a result of several decennia of growing autonomy, the Flemish and Walloon regions have gained in both authority and identity. Can we really expect them to willingly donate to the Brussels region the wealthiest chunks of their territories, namely the parts of the province of Brabant they managed to claim as theirs in the regionalization process? Or can one expect a strong Belgian or even European government to force them to give up under threat what they would not willingly donate? The not very philosophical answer to these questions is no. And the philosophical footnote would be that no “regional injustice” would thereby be perpetrated, providing of course the Belgian

22 This general point was neatly illustrated in the context of a very instructive workshop on Brussels hosted by the KU Leuven research centre VIVES (16 June 2011). The organizers warmly recommended a recent book by Harvard economist Edward Glaeser, whom they had attempted to invite for the occasion. After explaining why cities systematically tend to attract lots of poor people and reaffirming the great importance of redistribution for the sake of both social justice and economic efficiency, Glaeser illustrates in his book how disastrous it can be for cities to deal with redistribution themselves: “A nation’s poor are every citizen’s responsibility”, he writes, “not just the people who happen to live in the same political jurisdiction. It is fairer, both to the poor and to cities, if social services are funded at the national rather than the local level.” (Glaeser, Edward, The Triumph of the City, New York, Penguin, 2011, 258). Not everyone at the workshop may have heard this with delight. But a point is sometimes more readily heard, grasped and believed when yelled from across the Atlantic: no tiny Brussels without a robust Belgium.
federal state remains firmly in charge of the competences with strong cross-regional externalities, not least the key redistributive powers.23

4. Europe’s trilingual capital

Against the background of this discussion of the linguistic territoriality principle, what justifies it and what it entails, I can now offer a fuller picture of the direction in which I claim we can and must move in Belgium, as far as languages are concerned. I shall do so by listing and motivating briefly the main components of what I believe to be a feasible and desirable linguistic regime for the Brussels Region, its immediate surroundings and the rest of the country. The order followed does not reflect the chronological order in which these components should be put into place: we shall have to use any opportunity that arises in order to progress along each of the directions I shall sketch. Nor does the order reflect the relative importance I give to each component. Instead, it is dictated by the fact that some components of what I propose provide a background in the absence of which other components would be less realistic and/or less defensible.

First of all, the Brussels Region itself, wherever its borders are drawn, should be given an officially trilingual status, with English added to French and Dutch. This does not mean that English should be given exactly the same status as the other two languages. No need whatever, for example, to add a third linguistic version to every street name. But public communication and administrative procedures of all sorts and at all levels within the borders of the Region, must become possible in English as well as in French and in Dutch. As a result, it should become possible to get away with settling quite comfortably in Brussels without knowing either of the two local languages. This first component of the reform package I propose can be interpreted as a further relaxation of the present-day bilingual regime. Some relaxation in this direction has already happened. For example, the use of English is predominant, sometimes even exclusive, in the huge posters publicly displayed by the European Commission on the Berlaymont building. It is also present, next to French and Dutch, in the Brussels public transport system. Moreover, in part of Brussels’ public education system — namely the four and soon five European Schools funded by the European Commission and the governments of the member states —, pupils can graduate without having followed a single lesson in either French or Dutch.24 My proposal is to extend and officialise such “facilities” for English in public communication and public education —

23 Moreover, it is not too difficult to turn this necessity into a virtue. Firstly, preserving the coincidence between regional and linguistic borders has the advantage of giving a clearer message about the area in which citizens are expected to integrate by learning the same one official language, instead of giving the impression that there is a grey area (the monolingual portion of a bilingual area) in which this is only half expected: the implementation of the territorial regime would be facilitated as a result. Secondly, the absolute necessity of keeping more powers at the central level owing to the small size of the central urban component of the federation generates a structural pressure to maintain a more generous solidarity across all components of the federation and thereby to better serve the ultimate ideal of global distributive justice. Consequently, both a more effective pursuit of linguistic justice as equal dignity and the achievement of justice as equal opportunity on a higher scale may be welcome by-products of what may look at first sight, compared to Maskens’s original proposal, a second best option.

24 Whatever their linguistic section, European School pupils need to choose one out of three languages — English, French or German — as a second medium of secondary education. In the Brussels schools, most of those who are not in the English section choose English as their second language.
including through the development of open and co-funded so-called type II European schools with English as one of the teaching languages — and to further extend them to the judiciary and, in due course, to political life.

Why this further loosening of Brussels’ linguistic regime? This cannot have anything to do with the pursuit of justice as equal dignity. First of all, it is it a concession that favours the use of a powerful language that is thereby given more leeway to displace from some contexts the two local languages that enjoyed exclusive protection so far.\textsuperscript{25} Moreover, it is meant to benefit mostly people who do not have English as their mother tongue and do not identify with that language at all. According to the best data we have,\textsuperscript{26} people with English as their native language (or one of their native languages) form around 3\% of the Brussels adult population and unlike people who speak it well (around 35\% of adult Brusselers according to the same source), they will always remain a small minority. The justification for a move to official trilingualism has nothing to do with the dignity of Anglophones. It can be traced to the contingent fact that the government in charge of the first rotating presidency of the European Economic Community — Belgium, as it happens, because of the alphabetic order — had to find an improvised shelter for its first public servants in January 1958. From then on, Brussels grew step by step into the uncontested political capital of the European Union. This is a major historical responsibility, in the service of a daring, difficult, unprecedented project, of momentous importance for the effective pursuit of worldwide justice. Brussels would dishonour itself if it did not do its utmost to discharge it properly. And this has linguistic implications, which few would have anticipated in 1958.

What happened since is that the worldwide spreading of English, successive EU enlargements and the local operation of the maxi-min dynamics are working together to make English each day more dominant in interactions within and around the Brussels-based EU institutions. As argued at length elsewhere,\textsuperscript{27} this is a trend to be welcomed and accelerated. Convergence towards a shared language is an essential condition for the European Union to function better and to become able to take over a number of functions which nation-states are no longer able to perform properly.\textsuperscript{28} Consequently, if Brussels is to be up to the job it happens to have been entrusted with, it will need to upgrade the official local status of the unofficial language of the European institutions. Some may understandably regret this. The citizens and authorities of Brussels, however, should not waste any time on such rear guard battles. They must instead adjust proactively to the linguistic imperative inherent in Brussels’

\textsuperscript{25} However, this greater leeway should not lead to the gradual eviction of the other two languages. As argued below (§ 6), because of the exceptional circumstances of the Brussels region (a tiny territory connected by massive interdependencies with its two monolingual neighbouring regions), a conjunctive trilingual regime (with competence in all three languages shared by most) need not be a pipedream in Brussels if both at school and elsewhere language learning is intelligently fostered.


\textsuperscript{27} \textit{LJ}, chapter 1.

\textsuperscript{28} As is, for reasons fundamentally analogous, convergence towards a single political capital (see \textit{LJ} chapter 1, fn14; and Ph. Van Parijs & J. Van Parys, “Brussels, capital of Europe: a sustainable choice?”, \textit{Brussels Studies} 38, May 2010, \texttt{www.brusselsstudies.be}).
historical mission, in the interest of both the smooth working of the European Union and the prosperity of the local population.

5. An overflow tank for Brussels’ expats

As argued by implication above (§3), the comparatively accommodating linguistic regime thus granted to the half per cent of Belgium’s surface that counts as the capital of the European Union must not be regarded as freely expandable to the metropolitan area that surrounds Brussels. Those who choose to settle in this area must accept the possible inconvenience of having to learn the language of the region, whether Dutch or French. Europeans must be clearly told that although Brussels is, must be and will become more and more their capital, with the rights and duties this entails, Belgium as a whole is not and must never become their colony. As argued above (§2) and elsewhere, the fixity of the linguistic border is crucial. For this reason, the splitting of the B-H-V constituency, though not directly relating to the language regime, was understandably regarded on both sides as asserting the non-expandability of the area in which a more accommodating linguistic regime will prevail. This should hold for English no less than for French.

The implementation of this linguistic carcan, i.e. the linguistic integration of households settling on officially monolingual land beyond the borders of the accommodating Brussels Region, will not be self-evident everywhere. It will constitute a challenge for both Flanders and Wallonia, but a more serious one for Flanders than for Wallonia for three reasons. Firstly, people coming directly from abroad are more likely to know at least some French than some Dutch. Secondly, far more Brusselers can speak French than Dutch — 96% versus 28% according to the most reliable data. And thirdly, Brussels being nested inside Flanders, its immediate periphery lies mostly in Flanders. The resulting challenge will prove unmanageable unless it is eased through the combination of two strategies.

Compared to the second, the first of these strategies is simple and cheap. It consists in including in the trilingual Region of Brussels Capital the six Flemish communes with facilities for French, thereby making these six communes just as accommodating as the Brussels Region itself in a clear, unambiguous way that does not breed confusion about the official monolingualism of Flemish Brabant. This is no infringement of the linguistic border fixity rule which I insisted is intrinsic to the territoriality principle. In the 1962-63 deal that

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29 LJ §5.2.
30 Striking evidence about the size of this challenge in Flemish Brabant was provided by recent data from the catholic school network showing that in several of the Flemish communes without facilities around Brussels, primary school pupils with Dutch as their mother tongue are on their way to becoming a minority (see “Massale instroom van Franstalige leerlingen in Vlaamse scholen”, De Morgen, 25 August 2011, p.3).
fixed the linguistic border, the linguistic facilities conceded to these six communes were not transitional facilities to be gradually phased out (of the sort hinted at in §2 above and discussed at some length elsewhere 33). It was then decided, laboriously but unambiguously, that these facilities would apply not just to the people who then lived in those communes, but also indefinitely to any newcomer or newly born. Half a century after the deal, street names are still and are meant to remain in both languages, and although the bulk of the current inhabitants of these communes lived elsewhere at the time or were not born, they are all entitled to exactly the same administrative and educational facilities as the people who were taken by surprise by the fixation of the border. No wonder, therefore, that the proportion of people with French as their only native language is nowadays on average higher in those communes than in the Brussels Region itself. 34 Those who were chanting “Faciliteiten, stommiteiten!” in 1962 were absolutely right if what they meant was that granting such permanent facilities would allow the “oil stain” to proceed unimpeded in these communes. But they were wrong in believing that this would be, in the long term, a bad thing for Flanders — just as the Francophones outraged a few years later at the prospect of the UCL being ejected from Leuven did not anticipate how good a thing this would turn out to be for Francophone Belgium. Let me explain.

One is now beginning to discover the new nature and size of the challenge presented by the implementation of the territorial regime in the Flemish communes to the East and South of Brussels, from St Stevens Woluwe to Hoeilaart via Tervuren and Overijse. In this opulent part of Flemish Brabant, the main problem will be less and less the unwillingness to learn Dutch by snooty Belgian Francophones. The latter are beginning to understand at long last that in Flanders even more than in Brussels it makes a lot of sense to make one’s children bilingual by sending them to a Dutch-medium school while transmitting French at home. In the years to come, the trouble will stem instead more and more from the swelling Brussels-based expat community, only a small minority of which can be expected to become actively interested in learning Dutch. As a striking illustration, take the huge forty-year old Tervuren-based British School, a powerful magnet for Anglophones in Flemish Brabant. Starting in September 2011, it is offering, next to the pure English-medium curriculum, a bilingual one. “Finally!”, some may cheer after hearing this, “at long last, these folk have realized that they are established in Flanders and understood the importance of showing respect for the local language”. But they will quickly have to shelve their enthusiasm: “bilingual”, it turns out, here means “English/French”.

The point thereby illustrated is that in order to prevent the territorial regime becoming either a joke or a nightmare in those communes, it is essential to provide sufficient living space to the growing number of foreign nationals who are as perfectly willing and able to integrate into Brussels as the EU capital as they are unwilling and unable to integrate into the

33 LJ §5.12.
Flemish or Walloon populations. Removing the remaining confusion by adding the six communes with facilities to the trilingual Brussels Region is an obvious way of enhancing the power of these communes as permanent magnets that will help release the pressure on the rest of Flemish Brabant.\textsuperscript{35} If metaphors can help: such a small expansion of the Brussels Region does not amount to the construction of a corridor or the sowing of a \textit{bretelle} that would hold together the two pieces of a \textit{nation francophone} that will never exist. Rather, it provides a badly needed overflow tank for the exploding Brussels-based expat community.

What I am arguing for obviously constitutes a slight redrawing of the regional border. As explained above, this minor shift would not be a shift in the language border, but an alignment of the regional border on the language border. Nonetheless it implies that Flanders would be giving up an admittedly tiny but fairly crowded and affluent portion of its territory: about a third of one percent of its surface and slightly above one percent of its population. This will not mean much in terms of tax base: the taxable part of the incomes earned by the residents of these communes will keep shrinking, as it has been doing for years in the South-Eastern quarter of the Brussels Region, because the proportion of wealthy residents escaping partly or fully Belgian income taxation will keep rising. Nonetheless, it would be silly to deny that a concession is involved, for which a compensation must be sought as part of a broader package.

What this broader package should be is now obvious to me.\textsuperscript{36} In order to provide the government of the German Community with a coherent bundle of competences, one needs to

\textsuperscript{35} Without waiting for this to happen and Brussels to become officially trilingual, the Flemish government could show how clever and forward-looking it is by introducing administrative facilities for English in these communes, instead of stubbornly tarnishing its international reputation by multiplying skirmishes around the facilities granted to French.

\textsuperscript{36} I suggested earlier a different deal, whereby the four smaller communes with facilities would join Brussels, while the two bigger ones (Rode and Wemmel) would see their facilities phased out (Ph. Van Parijs, “Réforme de l’Etat: en avant!”, \textit{Le Soir}, 23/8/07, p.15 ; and « Staatshervorming : vooruit ! », \textit{De Standaard}, 23/8/07, p.16, www.uclouvain.be/8610.). But I subsequently changed my mind (Ph. Van Parijs, « BHV: Place à la sagesse et à l'ambition », \textit{Le Soir}, 29/4/10 ; and « Wijsheid en ambitie voor ons land”, \textit{De Morgen}, 27/4/10, p. 21, www.uclouvain.be/8610; Ph. Van Parijs, “Un bon compromis? », \textit{Le Soir}, 23 octobre 2010, p.35 ; and « De nobele kunst om een goed compromis te sluiten” in \textit{De Morgen}, 23/10/10, p.18. Downloadable from www.uclouvain.be/8610) because new facts and arguments persuaded me that there was a far more elegant and intelligent alternative. Firstly, the latest demographic data about these communes indicate that, in one of them at least (Kraainem) the number of Belgian citizens has started falling in both relative and absolute terms, and thereby suggest that the proportion of “Francophones” (in the sense of Belgian citizens with French as their mother tongue) may well have started declining. (This is not visible in election results, as analysed for example by Frees (W. Frees, “Electorale verfransing van de Vlaamse Rand rond Brussel: feit of fictie?”, K.U.Leuven: VIVES, 2011, 22 p.), in part because a large proportion of the non-Belgians settling in these communes does not vote but above all because such results unavoidably use a lens that admits of only two colours and are therefore intrinsically unable to capture the novelty of the challenge.) Secondly, with the imminent opening of the fourth big European school in Laeken (scheduled for September 2012), Wemmel will need to serve as an overflow tank just as crucial for releasing the pressure on the Flemish communes to the North of Brussels as four of the other communes will remain for the East and South. Thirdly, the growing plausibility of turning the German-speaking Community into a full-fledged Region (see e.g. J. Vande Lanotte, \textit{De Belgische Unie bestaat uit vier deelstaten}, Brussel: sp.A, 2011) has drawn attention to a far greater alteration of regional borders symmetric enough to supply an evident counterpart. Finally and perhaps most decisively, I realized the political impossibility of differentiating the fates of these communes after forty years of shared official status and similar sociolinguistic
transfer to it the bulk of the so-called place-related (as opposed to person-related) competences, currently exercised by the Walloon Region in the nine German-speaking communes in the East of the province of Liège. This would be tantamount to transforming these communes into a full-fledged region of Ostbelgien and hence to removing from the Walloon region about five percent of its surface and two percent of its citizens, that is a population of about the same size as the population living in the six communes with facilities around Brussels and a territory seventeen times bigger. Creating this fourth region is obviously a more serious boundary change than the tiny shift involved in adding six smallish communes to Brussels. No one could seriously advocate the former while objecting to the latter on the ground that regional borders are sacrosanct. True, the creation of this fourth Region, though a fellow Germanic one, can hardly be packaged as a gift made by Wallonia to Flanders. But nor is the adding of the six communes to the trilingual region of Brussels-Capital a gift by Flanders to Wallonia. Fundamentally, both moves consist in the two large Regions giving up a small part of their territory (0.3% and 5%, respectively) and of their population (1% and 2%, respectively) in the interest of a smoother, simpler and more transparent functioning of the linguistic dimension of our federation: the linguistic identity of each component will be sharpened and the implementation of the territorial regime will be made more effective and more sustainable.

6. Born-again Brusselers

In order to make the territorial regime manageable in Flanders, the slight expansion of trilingual Brussels here proposed will be far from superfluous. But it will not be sufficient. Even expanded by six communes, the Brussels Region remains very exiguous (0.7% of the country’s surface, 61 times smaller than Flanders, 73 times smaller than Wallonia without Ostbelgien). Because of the linguistic carcan, people drawn to Brussels by its cosmopolitan function will tend to suburbanize less than would otherwise be the case, thereby helping preserve the central urban area from decay but also boosting housing costs within its borders. Combined with comparatively high local birth rates and an attractiveness to poor immigrants shared with most prosperous Northern cities, this will make it increasingly difficult for young people growing up in Brussels to find affordable accommodation in their ever more densely populated city. The problem for the Flemish periphery, therefore, will not just be the affluent expats unwilling to learn Dutch, but even more the far less affluent native Brusselers who will keep pouring out of the urban core. Whether they like it or not, Flemish communes will have to house many of these people, as no fence, no discriminatory law and no racist attitude will dynamics. Both the Flemish and Francophone negotiators would face something like “Sophie’s choice” (the mother who arrives in Auschwitz and must decide whether her son or her daughter will be gassed): they would have to decide and justify which of their keen supporters they would save and which they would sacrifice — by letting them be engulfed by Brussels in one case, by abandoning them in Flemish hands in the other. Under the agreement reached between the negotiators in September 2011 on the splitting up of the electoral district of Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde (unlike the confused bricolage concocted for the judiciary district), the asymmetry between all six communes and the rest of Flemish Brabant becomes deeper than ever, which further undermines the political plausibility of the deal I proposed earlier, while constituting another important further step in the direction I now advocate. The fruit may not be ripe enough for picking, but the ripening goes on.
ever be able to prevent them from crossing the Brussels ring road in search of a place to live and bring up their children, not too far from where they grew up and from where they are likely to find work. Their integration will happen smoothly, in the interest of both themselves and the local population, only if enough of them will have acquired in Brussels, prior to moving into Flanders, an adequate level of competence in Dutch. Unfortunately, though probably higher than it has ever been in the 1000-year history of the city, the proportion of Brusselers who have more than a basic knowledge of Dutch as a second language is still very low. For this reason, though not only for this reason, it is essential to boost dramatically the knowledge of Dutch by Brussels’s home-grown population.

Is this possible? Yes, but only if there is enough humility to learn from elsewhere and enough boldness to innovate. Firstly, we must take the trouble to have a very close look at what is being done abroad: how can pupils in Luxembourg and in Barcelona achieve proficiency in the two (and even three) locally official languages, despite the large presence, in those cities not much less than in Brussels, of many children with none of the official languages as their native language? Each situation is different, and straight transpositions seldom make much sense. But in order to avoid major blunders and to broaden our perception of what is feasible, there is nothing more fruitful than understanding what works, what does not work and why in places broadly similar to ours.

Secondly, partly in the light of the lessons to be drawn from what is being achieved elsewhere, we must dare to experiment and innovate. For example, we must take seriously ideas as radical as the proposal that all Brussels children should learn to read and write in Dutch, as is already happening in some immersion schools in Wallonia. Less radically, we must “responsibilize” the schools, networks or communities operating in Brussels for their contribution to the bilingualism of its population by making the level of their (ultimately federal) funding depend not only on the number of pupils they attract but also, through a handsome per capita bonus, on the number of these pupils who do not have the school language as their mother tongue (regardless of whether this mother tongue is one of the official languages). All this will be to no avail unless accompanied by vigorous measures to secure an adequate supply of teachers, especially native speakers of Dutch willing and able to come to Brussels and stay. The removal of absurd administrative obstacles to teaching in the schools of the other language regime may help. But more will be needed, such as an

37 See R. Janssens, Van Brussel gesproken. Taalgebruik, taalverschuivingen en taalidentiteit in het Brussels hoofdstedelijk gewest. Brussels, VUB Press, 2007. The possibility of having Dutch-language schools in Brussels (which would be ruled out under a coercive regime on behalf of the dominant language) is no doubt a necessary condition for the maintenance and growth of competence in Dutch among the Brussels population. But, combined with Flanders’ relative prosperity, the firm territorial protection of Dutch in the immediate periphery of the tiny bilingual area is crucial: the steady fall in the number of native Dutch-speakers living in Brussels would not begin to be offset by the growth in the number of secondary Dutch speakers if no Dutch was needed to get a job and live comfortably all around Brussels. Paradoxically, the linguistic territoriality principle both sucks Flemings out of Brussels and turns non-Flemish Brusselers into competent Dutch speakers.

38 Using the terminology of LJ §5.1, this would essentially amount to turning Brussels’ coercive bilingual regime from a disjunctive one (less coercive than official monolingualism) into a conjunctive one (more coercive than official monolingualism).

appropriate use of the large stock of publicly owned housing, in order to fix enough teachers with a profile in high demand, whether attracted from the other two regions or locally bred. Finally, school cannot do it all, and an intelligent synergy with Brussels-based media and cultural actors must help create virtuous circles of competence and contact that will enable children growing up in Brussels to practice their languages beyond school.  

To facilitate this multidimensional innovation process, it would be of great help if the ultimate responsibility for the fair and efficient education of all young Brusselers were clearly allocated to the government of the Brussels Region, and if powers were accordingly transferred from the Communities. This will only happen, however, when there will be enough assurance that the regional authorities will not seize these new powers to squeeze Dutch out of the city as swiftly as possible, but on the contrary mobilize them to the full to disseminate competence in Dutch in the population more vigorously and effectively than has ever been the case in the history of the city. Not out of veneration for the Flemish literature or under pressure from Flemish nationalism, but in the first instance because it is in the interest of the children to whom they are politically responsible. Linguistic competence will be a core asset for the Brussels population as a whole and, whatever their other qualifications and sector of activity, for most of its individual members. The chief lasting comparative advantage of the locals will be their ability to connect the increasingly cosmopolitan and English-using capital of the European Union with the two neighbouring regions in which Dutch and French will remain entrenched.

This obviously supposes that the locals should learn English too, as everyone else in Europe and beyond. With respect to English no less than with respect to the other national language, large-scale language acquisition will require a lot of imagination and innovation. One of the ways forward, already briefly mentioned (§4), is the development of open European Schools of type II, i.e. jointly funded by “Europe” and “Belgium” in proportion to the number of pupils who are versus are not children of EU civil servants. But access to proficiency in English should not remain an elite feature. Providing it is sequenced in an intelligent way and providing spotless spelling and syntax are not regarded as meaningful objectives, the simultaneous learning of three languages is by no means a pipedream, if started early enough, with plenty of opportunities for practice both available (as they are in Brussels) and used (as they are far too little so far). Under these conditions, there is no reason

40 Perhaps born-again Brusselers could find some guidance and inspiration in a posthumous writing by Brussels’s first great intellectual: « Il faut approuver la pratique de ceux qui s’efforcent d’inculquer à leurs enfants la connaissance de deux langues différentes entre elles par la prononciation et le vocabulaire. En agissant ainsi, on habituera leur langue encore souple à deux méthodes différentes de prononciation et on la rendra plus habile à exprimer plus tard les dialectes de n’importe quel langage étranger. » (Philippe de Marnix de Sainte Aldegonde, Traité d’éducation de la jeunesse [1583], Bruxelles : Editions ARSCIA, 1959, p.35.)


why more English should come at the expense of other languages. No zero-sum anguish should inhibit progress towards sustainable widespread trilingualism. Competence in English is essential to link up efficiently with the Brussels-based international institutions and community, while competence in the two main national languages is indispensable to be able to serve as links with the surroundings in a way unavailable to outsiders. More important than any other investment, producing and reproducing a trilingual workforce will be Brussels’ most productive investment in the decennia to come.43

This conception of the linguistic future of Brussels obviously requires, on the part of Brussels’ Francophone majority a sharp break away from the attitude that has been prevailing until recently and from the rear guard battles it keeps feeding. As regards English, the frustration and resentment about French having been irreversibly dislodged from the top position in and around the European institutions must give way to an active appropriation of English as a tool for cross-border communication and mobilization — and to a feeling of relief about the fact that the language that emerged as the global lingua franca happens to be so closely related to French. The change of attitude towards Dutch is even more important. Instead of looking down at Dutch as a remnant of Brussels’s remote past, instead of resisting it as a language which the few true Flemings left in Brussels rigidly insist on using, instead of regarding it as no more than an idiom one is obliged to learn for purely utilitarian reasons, Francophone Brusselsers are well advised to value it as they have never done before. As eight of them put it in a recent opinion piece: “Our education endowed us with a deep bond with Francophone culture and the French language. But the Flemish culture and the Dutch language are and must remain equally important components of the Brussels identity. Very far from wanting to eradicate Dutch from Brussels, we believe it is of capital importance for the future of young Brusselsers, whatever their origins, that they should learn Dutch incomparably better than their elders, that they should be proud of being able to speak it, that it should be part of what they are.”44 While gradually making its way through the intellectual and cultural elites, this new attitude needs to percolate far more widely. It is essential not only to generate the political will to introduce the policies needed to spread trilingualism, but also to help motivate Brusselers of all ages to learn Dutch as well as English in addition to French.45 Contempt is just a cheap excuse for ignorance and laziness. It needs to give way to respect and appreciation.

43 Trilingualism is the sense used so far clearly means, for a significant proportion of the Brussels population, quadrilingualism or more. The consistent domestic use and intergenerational transmission of immigrant languages must be strongly encouraged, both as a way of recognizing the value of an important dimension of residents of foreign origin and as a way of preserving an important economic asset. The hundreds of languages that are being practiced daily in Brussels homes must be cherished for themselves but also valued as mutually beneficial links with many places around the world. Relative to French, Dutch and English, however, including them in the curriculum is not a priority and can be counterproductive.


By fostering the democratization of trilingualism, the attitude thus advocated fits as a core element in a strategy for preventing jobs in and around Brussels from being snapped by youngsters from Flemish or Walloon Brabant currently more trilingual in the above sense than the average youth growing up in Brussels. It also fits in with an inclusive and forward-looking Brussels patriotism of the sort first explicitly articulated, perhaps, in the December 2006 call “Nous existons/ Wij bestaan/ We exist”. The development of such inclusive patriotism will certainly blow up any lingering hope that Belgium will ever be held together through the con-domination of Brussels by Flanders and Wallonia. But no harm is being done here: colonial dreams should be ditched forever. By contrast, there is no reason to believe that a Brussels patriotism that honours, indeed cherishes both of the languages that link it to Belgium’s two larger regions should damage the federation rather than strengthen it.

7. The linguistic dilemma of Belgian democracy

Before closing, I need to add a few words about the linguistic future of the other components of the federation, and in particular about how the monolingual territorial regime that applies and, in my view, should apply to them can be compatible with a sensible running of our federal democracy. For no democracy can function, it seems, without enough people from all corners of the demos being capable of talking to each other. No Belgian democracy can function without at least the elites in Flanders and Wallonia being able to communicate with each other. As Van Velthoven rightly notes, “for a very long time Flanders kept Belgium linguistically together”. In recent years, however, competence in French has been declining quickly among the Flemish elite, in part because of competition with English but also because Flemings feel that it should not be up the country’s linguistic majority, especially now that it has become the more affluent of the two communities, to make the effort of learning the language of the minority. On the other side of the border, despite the widely publicized emergence of a couple of hundreds of schools with immersion classes that cater for a tiny subset of Francophone pupils, it cannot be said that great efforts are being deployed. Whereas

46 See http://www.brusselsvoice.be/en/node/831 for the text of this call and the list of the ten thousand or so Brusselers who signed it.

47 I am not talking here about the survival conditions of the country. As noted before (§1), Belgium’s territorial regime does create centrifugal and, at the limit, separatist pressures. But as I and many others have had other opportunities to explain, the guarantee of survival of the country follows neither from mutual affection nor from common nationhood but from the double fact that neither of the two main regions is willing to quit Belgium without Brussels, nor able to quit Belgium with Brussels. See e.g. Ph. Van Parijs, “La Belgique est-elle coupable (en trois)?”, Libération, in Libération (Paris) 14/06/11, p.25; also in Le Soir 14/06/11, p.15 ; and as « Omdat Brussel ons Jeruzalem is. Is de Belgische natie een anachronistisch verzinsel? », in De Standaard 14/06/11, www.uclouvain.be/8610 for one succinct explanation addressed to a foreign audience, and B. Barry, Culture and Equality, Cambridge, Polity Press, 2001, 312 for one foreigner’s snappy and unsympathetic, yet insightful summary: “But the endless process of haggling that is Belgian politics is so nauseating to all concerned that it is widely thought that the country would already have broken up if it were not for the problem posed by Brussels, a Francophone enclave in Flemish territory that is too big a prize for either side to be willing to relinquish.”

every Flemish child has French lessons from the fifth year of primary school onwards, those Walloon kids who do learn Dutch only do so seriously at secondary school, and many do not have any Dutch at all. Any outsider is bound to find it weird that the part of Belgian population that views itself and is perceived by others to be the one more attached to the existence of Belgium should expect to get away with learning so poorly the language of the country’s majority?

Against this background, how can one secure the linguistic preconditions for the viability of Belgian democracy? There are two options. One consists in both Flanders and Wallonia living up to the European Union’s proclaimed ideal of “mother tongue plus two”, i.e. competence in (at least) one other non-native language in addition to English, in this case the second national language. For most parts of the European Union, this is likely to remain wishful rhetoric. But possibly not in Flanders, where the proportion of the population that is (self)reported to speak English and French at more than a basic level exceeds 50%. Can this be sustained and improved? Certainly for English: average competence grows quickly every year, as younger cohorts replace older ones. But possibly also for French, providing policies and circumstances prevent the maxi-min dynamics from squeezing it out: the learning of French must keep preceding the learning of English at school, France must remain a top holiday destination for Flemings and French citizens must not develop too enthusiastically the capacity and desire to speak English. Of these three conditions, only the second can be assumed to be safe (barring dramatic climate change), but it is of precious little French-learning use if the other two are not satisfied.

What about Wallonia? The challenge is far greater. Not only do most Walloons, unlike all Brusselers, live quite a long distance from any significant concentration of Dutch native speakers. In addition, the operation of the maxi-min criterion will make French prevail in most conversations with Dutch-speaking Belgians and English prevail in most conversations with Dutch citizens. Unavoidably, this will badly affect the chance of ever practicing Dutch and hence both the motivation and opportunity to improve and maintain it. In such a context, democratizing competence in Dutch would require considerable resources. In particular, it would require placing the learning of Dutch at an early stage in the curriculum, before the

49 In 1998, the teaching of one foreign language (Dutch, English or German) was introduced in the last two years of primary school with two hours per week, but this subject is no part of the requirements for obtaining the primary school degree (C.E.B.). Pupils in the professional sections of secondary schools of the French community do not have any compulsory foreign language course at all, which means that many Walloon children (who do not have Dutch in primary school) graduate without having followed a single Dutch lesson. In technical and general sections, there is usually a choice between Dutch and English as first foreign language, and only in some cases the possibility of a second foreign language, with far less hours. (For further details, see C. Blondin, A. Fagnant & C. Goffin, “L’apprentissage des langues en Communauté française: curriculum, attitude des élèves et auto-évaluation”, Education-Formation 289, 2008, 73-92.) In 2009-10, among the pupils who have to take a foreign language in the first year of secondary school, 46% choose Dutch, with big sub-regional differences between, for example, over 80% in Brabant wallon and less than 30% in Liège or Luxembourg (G. Laurent, “L’anglais creuse l’écart sur le néerlandais”, La Libre Belgique, 11/10/2011).


learning of English. And it would require attracting a large number of native speakers of the Flemish variety of Dutch who would be willing to teach in Wallon schools despite a wage level lower than in Flemish schools. And all this would need to happen with tight budgets and rigid hiring rules. What is quite realistic in Brussels, providing the local linguistic wealth is intelligently harnessed, looks hopelessly out of reach in Wallonia, especially as the irresistible general rise in the knowledge of English will tend to evict Dutch from inter-Belgian conversations in which it could otherwise have had a chance given the declining proficiency in French in Flanders’ upper strata. This does not mean that nothing could or should be done in Wallonia. Indeed, the data suggest that the proportion of young Walloons that will end up knowing Dutch well or very well by the end of their learning period will be higher than it has ever been in the history of the country. But to make competence in Dutch a widely shared feature of the Wallonian population, someone would need to find a way out of the apparently insuperable obstacles just described.

Is there an alternative worth pondering about? Perhaps. It would consist in acknowledging that in all three regions English has irreversibly become the second most widely known language, and that the younger people are the wider the gap between their average competence in English and their average competence in the second national language. In light of the most relevant data available, it can even be safely conjectured that English will have overtaken both French and Dutch as Belgium’s most widely known language when the youngest cohort of adults will have completed their language learning period. Could Belgian democracy function through a medium distinct from the native languages of nearly all its citizens? This is exactly what we are expecting from most sub-Saharan African countries. So, why could we not expect it from ourselves? Perhaps because our strongly autonomous regions do function in local languages. But what about the Indian Union? In most of its states, the democratic system functions in an official language different from the two languages that enable communication at the level of the Union as a whole. Here too we should take the trouble to look more than a few miles beyond our borders and more than a few years beyond our time. What is unimaginable nonsense or scandalous heresy for parts of the old elites may already be self-evident to segments of the new ones. Moving in this direction would definitely infringe versions of the territorial regime more rigid than the one I defend, for

53 Along these lines, see Bruno De Wever (B. De Wever, « From Belgian Nation State to Nations in Belgium: Past, Present and Future », in B. De Wever (ed.), What does history teach us about the future of Belgium’s institutions? (B. De Wever ed.), Re-Bel e-book n°6, 2010, 38, www.rethinkingbelgium.eu): “Increasingly, English is becoming the lingua franca in the world and also in Europe. It may be wondered whether this offers the perspective for a future Belgium in which English will be a common medium for communication in well-defined fields, such as federal politics. Or is there a perspective hidden in the more mental shifts, which may effect an increase in the willingness of French speakers to learn Dutch? Maybe space will thus be created for bilingualism imposed by the authorities for anybody whose ambition is a social position anywhere in the country.”
54 See the appendix to the lead piece of this volume (graph 4).
55 As revealed, for example, by some hostile reactions to the use of English as the sole medium of communication in the Re-bel initiative.
56 As illustrated, for example, by the SHAME demonstration (subtitle: “No government, great country”) or by initiatives such as Hackdemocracy (http://hackdemocracy.org).
example, the one advocated by Grin. But let us keep in mind that territoriality is not synonymous with local monolingualism. Whether in Belgium, in the Europe Union or beyond, no democracy will be able to do a decent job without shared proficiency in a language that does not coincide, for many people, with the language protected in the region where they live.

Even in this second scenario, I hasten to say, wider and better knowledge of the second national language would by no means become redundant. It would definitely go some way towards meeting the demands of the opponents of the tout à l’anglais and the hopes encapsulated in the EU’s slogan “Mother tongue plus two”. More importantly, there are many things that can be achieved thanks to knowing the language of the other that could not be achieved through the channel of a shared lingua franca. Proficiency in the latter is no adequate substitute for the ability to follow directly the debates conducted in the other national language, whether face to face or in the media, nor for the ability to address members of the other linguistic group directly in their own language. Speaking the other’s mother tongue is a way of proving respect and breeding trust. It is therefore a major asset in the service of persuasion and a major contribution to the healthy functioning of a democracy. In the second scenario, competence in the other national language will therefore remain of great importance. But whereas competence in English is bound to spread throughout society in Belgium as elsewhere, good competence in French will become more and more of an elite feature in Flanders while competence in Dutch will remain the privilege of an elite in Wallonia, though hopefully a less tiny one than today. Only the exceptional sociolinguistic conditions that prevail in Brussels, if used far more vigorously and intelligently than now by the authorities responsible to its population, can justify a realistic hope for democratized trilingualism.

This brief tentative exploration of what seems to me the more promising of the two scenarios closes my sketch of what I believe Belgium’s linguistic future can be, must be and will be. This sketch was guided at the same time by the values I believe in and by what I have learned from many friends and colleagues speaking different languages and practicing different disciplines. It is in the essence of such a sketch that it should be revisable in the light of further evidence and insights. But a coherent, explicit picture of where we are going and need to go is essential to guide our steps. As neatly put in a very similar context by the very first author who bothered to address systematically the challenge of multilingual democracy: “Ohne weite Gesichtspunkte kein naher Erfolg, ohne theoretische Einsicht kein sicherer, praktischer Vorschlag.”

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58 “Without remote perspectives no immediate success, without theoretical insight, no certain, practical proposal.” (K. Renner, Das Selbstbestimmungsrecht der Nationen, in besonderer Anwendung auf Oesterreich, Leipzig & Wien, Franz Deuticke, 1918, 38. (Revised edition of Der Kampf der österreichischen Nationen um den Staat, Leipzig & Wien: Franz Deuticke, 1902.). Karl Renner was one of the main Austrian social-democratic thinkers and leaders (he became prime minister in the interbellum and first president of the Austrian Republic after World War II). In a book first published before the World War I, he rejected the linguistic territoriality principle and advocated for the Austrian Empire a non-territorial form of federalism based on eight linguistically defined nations (see LJ § 5.5). The quotation is taken from the beginning of the second edition of this book.
Although Renner’s substantive view is fundamentally different from mine, I find the justification he gives for bothering to elaborate it highly congenial and of more general relevance to much of what we academics can contribute to politics. Here is the context of the quote: “Wir unternehmen im gewöhnlichen Leben keinen Weg ohne Ziel, ausser um zu lustwandeln. Die politische Spaziergängerei muss auch bei uns ein Ende nehmen. Darum ist nichts aktueller als diese unreale, unaktuelle, ferne, utopische Endergebnis, als diese scheinbar theoretischen Grundsätze, Postulate, Tendenzen, die den Leser so leicht ermüden! Erst aus ihnen können wir leitende Gesichtspunkte für unser nächstes Handeln und ein Urteil über die Zweckmässigkeit unserer Augenblicksvorkehrungen ableiten... Ohne weite Gesichtspunkte kein naher Erfolg, ohne theoretische Einsicht kein sicherer, praktischer Vorschlag!”