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PVP'S COLUMN

BRUSSELS BILINGUAL? BRUSSELS FRANCOPHONE? BOTH AND NEITHER!

FORGET DUTCH AND FRENCH AS DOMINANT LANGUAGES IN BRUSSELS!!

SMURFS IS SMURFING TO BE THE NEXT BIG SMURF
The Kingdom of Belgium, you must have read somewhere, is a federal state that consists of two big monolingual regions and a tiny bilingual one. Is that so? Not quite.

True, Dutch is the sole official language of Flanders, with the exception of “facilities” for French speakers in a handful of communes, mostly around Brussels. True too, French is the sole official language of Wallonia, with the exception of a handful of communes near the German border, where German is the official language.

What about the third region, small but densely populated — over 10% of Belgium’s population on 0.5% of its surface — the Region of Brussels-Capital? It has two official languages on an equal footing, Dutch and French. This means that all official documents must be published in both languages, that both languages can be spoken in the parliament of the Brussels Region and in the councils of its nineteen municipalities, and that all publicly funded schools must use either Dutch or French as the medium of instruction.

In this sense, Brussels is bilingual. Does this mean that its population is bilingual, or at least that all Brusselers can speak either French or Dutch or both? This used to be the case. But the linguistic situation of the Brussels region has changed dramatically over the last two hundred years. Moreover, the beginning of the present century has witnessed a sudden break with some long-term trends.

Ever since the language border settled in the early Middle Ages, the bulk of the population of Brussels and its surroundings spoke Brabants, a version of Dutch (or Flemish, which is a variety of Dutch in about the same linguistic sense as American is a variety of English). From the moment the Dukes of Burgundy made Brussels their capital in the 15th century, however, the dominant language in a slowly growing elite was French.

In 1830, the Kingdom of Belgium was founded, like the French Republic at the end of the previous century, as an officially monolingual French-speaking state. It is only in 1898 that Dutch, spoken in some version by the majority of the population, was recognized as co-official at the level of the country, without this challenging the position of French in the capital as the dominant language in politics, education and administration.

Data on the linguistic competence of Brussels residents are available since shortly after Belgium’s independence [see insert]. What they show, between then and now, is a dramatic fall — from nearly 50% to practically nothing — in the proportion of Brusselers who know Dutch and no French.

This is matched by a no less dramatic increase — from 20% to over two thirds — in the proportion of Brusselers who know French and no Dutch [see Figure 1]. What happened? Not an exodus of monolingual Flemings compensated by an invasion of monolingual Walloons. Rather, a gradual “Frenchification” of Dutch speakers, whether original residents of Brussels or immigrants from Flanders.

From generation to generation, especially after the introduction of compulsory schooling, native

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**Figure 1**

**Brussels Region 1846-2011: Knowledge of Dutch and French**

Source: Taalbarometer VUB 2011.
Graph: Jonathan Van Parys
“Ever since the language border settled in the early Middle Ages, the bulk of the population of Brussels and its surroundings spoke Brabants, a version of Dutch. From the moment the Dukes of Burgundy made Brussels their capital in the 15th century, however, the dominant language in a slowly growing elite was French.”

This explains why Dutch-French bilinguals formed a strong relative majority at close to 50% for nearly three quarters of a century, from the end of the 19th century to after World War II. [see Figure 1]. This is the period in which Brussels could be called bilingual in the pretty strong sense that half its population could speak both Dutch and French, a proportion that is now down to about 20%.

In the last fifty years or so, the increase in the proportion of Brusselers speaking French and no Dutch was no longer only, nor even mainly caused by this slow process of “Frenchification”. It was further accelerated by two more factors: the arrival of a great many immigrants and expats who knew no Dutch and saw no point in learning it, and the emigration of many Dutch-speaking Brusselers to the Flemish periphery surrounding Brussels, where Dutch was henceforth entrenched owing to the definitive fixation of the language border in the 1960s.

One might have thought that these various trends would continue up to a point where practically the whole Brussels population would consist of people knowing French and no Dutch. But with the 21st century came a threefold surprise. There is evidence that three long-term trends suddenly find themselves in the process of being broken.

Firstly, for the first time in recorded history, the proportion of Brusselers who know Dutch and no French is slowly increasing. This may be due in part to the growing presence of citizens from the Netherlands, but also to the decline in the knowledge of French by young people arriving from Flanders.

Secondly, the proportion of people who know French and no Dutch has seen its century-long steady progress halted. This has not happened because of more Francophone Brusselers now learning Dutch (even though there is some indication that this is happening too): the proportion of bilinguals French-Dutch keeps falling, indeed more quickly in ten years than in the previous fifty.

The main cause is rather to be found in the third and most striking new development: the
fast swelling of a category that was insignifi-
cant throughout most of Brussels’s recorded
linguistic history and now corresponds to 10% of
the total: those who know neither Dutch nor
French (beyond a rudimentary level), most of
whom (8%), it turns out, know no English either.

What does all this lead to today? Let us first
look, for each of Brussels’ main languages, at
the proportion of adults who have it as their
native language or one of their native langu-
ages (i.e. spoken at home as a child) [in blue
in Figure 2]. French is clearly the dominant
language, with two thirds of the Brusselers
mentioning it as a native language. This is far
more than the 21% for Arabic, which has now
overtaken Dutch (20%) as Brussels’ second
native language.

None of the other languages reaches 5%. It is
worth noting, however, that the respondents
who report French as their sole native langu-
age form only one third of the sample, where-
as they were still over 50% five years earlier.
The other third consists of people who had
French at home as children, but combined with
another language, most often Arabic or Dutch.

As we turn from native language to linguistic
competence [in green in Figure 2], French,
as should be expected, becomes even more
dominant, with 89% claiming to know French
well or very well. Despite being less often men-
tioned as a native language than Arabic, Dutch
(with 23%) leaps ahead of Arabic (18%) in terms
of competence.

Contrary to all other languages, there are
less adults claiming competence in Arabic
than adults who spoke some Arabic at home
when they were children. Arabic is not taught
at school, and many families of Moroccan ori-
gin (close to 20% of the Brussels population)
switch entirely to French.

Unsurprisingly, however, the most spectacu-
lar difference between native language and
competence concerns English. With 30% of
competent speakers, it has clearly become
Brussels’ second language. It is, however, no-
teworthy, that the proportion of competent
speakers in all three of Brussels’ top langu-
ages has gone down in 2011 relative to five years
earlier: from 96 to 89% for French, from 35 to
30% for English and from 28 to 23% for Dutch.
The proportion of people competent in none
of these three languages, by contrast, rose
over the same period from 2.5 to 8%.

To sum up, Brussels is officially bilingual
French-Dutch, but the proportion of its popu-
lation that claims to speak both languages is
now down to 20% and still declining. Especially
in the last half century, Brussels has become
increasingly multilingual in terms of both nati-
ve language and competence.

In the representative yet small sample of 2500
Brusselers that provides us with the most
reliable data on Brussels’ current linguistic
situation, 104 distinct native languages were
detected. Among the 1.200.000 Brusselers,
one can safely bet that literally hundreds of
languages are being spoken, albeit sometimes
just by a single household.

Further, Brussels is a “francophone” city in the
sense that two thirds of its population grew
up with French present in the home context,
albeit in half the cases in combination with
another language. But it is definitely no longer
on a path that would take it from a situation
in which the bulk of the population had Dutch
only as its sole mother tongue to one in which
it will have French as its sole mother tongue.

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Brussels can also be called a “francophone” city in the sense that close to 90% of its population can speak it well or very well. But this proportion has recently started to decline, and in some environments it now faces competition with English as Brussels’ lingua franca.

Both a Flemish Reconquista and a linguistic cleansing on behalf of French are now obsolete dreams to be shelved forever. Brussels has no choice but to embrace its multilingual future.1

1 Those who share this conviction should be interested by the Marnix Plan for a Multilingual Brussels (www.marnixplan.org).

How do we know what languages Brusselers can speak?

In 1846, a language question was included in Belgium’s first census after independence. It asked all residents of the country which language they spoke. Starting with the following census (1866) and until the last census with a linguistic part (1947), residents were no longer asked which language (in the singular) they spoke, but which languages (in the plural) they knew. Figure 1 shows the aggregate census results for the 19 municipalities that now form the Brussels Region.

Because of opposition by hundreds of Flemish mayors to the inclusion of a linguistic question, the 1957 census was postponed. Why this opposition? By virtue of legislation passed in the 1930s, the answers to this question determined the official linguistic status of a municipality. If the proportion of residents that declared they knew French exceeded some threshold, the official status of a municipality would switch from monolingual Dutch to bilingual. (In principle, this could also happen in the other direction, but never did.) As a result of this opposition it was decided in 1961 that the linguistic part of the national census would be scrapped. This is why the most recent linguistic data Belgium possesses covering its whole territory dates back to 1947.

Starting in 2001, however, the Flemish governments funds every five years a comprehensive language survey for the Brussels region, using a fairly representative sample of all adult local residents. This is the Taalbarometer of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel. A book based on the 2011 Taalbarometer and making comparisons with the two earlier ones was published in both Dutch and French (Rudi Janssens, Meertaligheid als cement van de stedelijke samenleving, VUB Press, 2012; Le multilinguisme urbain. Le cas de Bruxelles, VUB Press, 2013).

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