



## "Linguistic legitimacy among pluricentric languages. The case of Belgian French"

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# Linguistic Legitimacy among Pluricentric Languages: The Case of Belgian French

## Abstract

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the social legitimacy of the non-dominant variety of French that is used in Belgium (henceforth 'Belgian French'). As will be detailed, Francophone Belgians' attitudes have shifted from early 19<sup>th</sup> c. – late 20<sup>th</sup> c. purism and subsequent linguistic subjection to France to more recent acceptance of endogenous traits and increasing distance from the Hexagonal model. Nevertheless, these attitudes remain characterized by a "double distance" from both Hexagonal and Belgian French. The idea that French is viewed by Francophone Belgians as a pluricentric/polynomic language will thus be questioned: do they really consider that there is a legitimate Belgian variety of French? What is the relevance of the national criterion in the way they define linguistic norms? What other criteria lie behind the definition and legitimization of their linguistic norms?

## 1. Introduction

Despite being one of the smallest countries in Europe, Belgium is home to a remarkable linguistic diversity. Located between the North Sea, France, the Netherlands, Germany, and Luxembourg, Belgium straddles the cultural and linguistic border between Germanic and Latin Europe. The country counts three official languages: French, Dutch, and German. Unlike in other multilingual countries, however, the contact zones between these three languages are strongly limited. Indeed, they are granted the status of official languages only within well-defined language areas (see figure 1):

- The Dutch language area, which constitutes about 57,2%<sup>1</sup> of the Belgian population (i.e. 6.410.705 inhabitants);

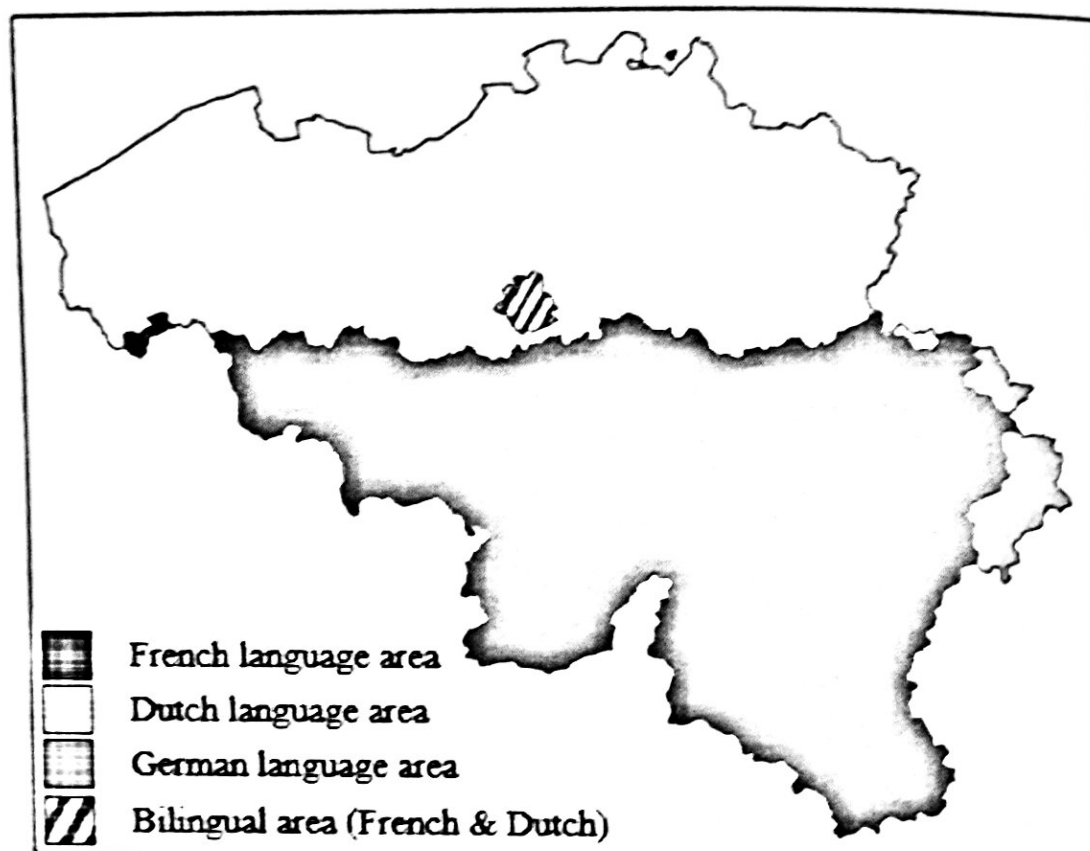
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\* In: Rudolf Muhr (ed.) (2016): *Pluricentric Languages and Non-Dominant Varieties Worldwide. Part I: Pluricentric Languages across Continents. Features and Usage*. In collaboration with Kelen Ernesta Fonyuy, Zeinab Ibrahim and Corey Miller. Wien et. al., Peter Lang Verlag. p. 385–397.

<sup>1</sup> The following figures are all from Direction Générale Statistique 2014: 6.

- The French language area, which comprises about 31,4% of the Belgian population (i.e. 3.576.325 inhabitants);
- The often-forgotten German language area, which makes up for only 0.7% of the total population (i.e. 76.273 inhabitants);
- The bilingual area of Brussels-Capital, which comprises 10,4% of the population (i.e. 1.163.486 inhabitants) and, in spite of being predominantly French-speaking, must provide all public services and administration (e.g. public announcements, street names, and road signs) in French and in Dutch.

Figure 1: Map of Language Areas in Belgium.



## 2. Historical Perspective

The use of French in Wallonia and Brussels has evolved along two well-distinct pathways.

### 2.1 French in Wallonia

In Wallonia, as in all of Romance Europe, the fragmentation of Vulgar Latin gave rise to a plethora of regional varieties. Four major dialect families emerged; namely Walloon, Picard, Lorrain (also called Gaumais), and Champenois. Yet

Wallonia also contributed to the development of the French language very early on, as attested by documents such as the *Séquence* (or *Cantilène*) *de sainte Eulalie* (around 882) and the *Sermon sur Jonas* (10<sup>th</sup> century). French and local languages coexisted in Wallonia for several centuries in a typical diglossic pattern, with French gradually getting the upper hand on local languages, which became confined to informal exchanges between peers and relatives.

However, unlike in France or Switzerland, it was not until the end of the First World War and the establishment of compulsory primary education (1914) that local languages were eradicated. This time lag partly accounts for the significant impact that local languages have had upon Francophone Belgians' language attitudes and practices, compared to other Francophone regions (Francard, forthcoming 2016).

## 2.2 French in Brussels

Due to the geographic situation of the city, which is located in a historically Flemish territory, French in Brussels was implanted much later on. Founded in the 6<sup>th</sup> century, the city of Brussels was originally inhabited by speakers of Dutch dialects. The use of French in the capital progressed very slowly: although it was first introduced in the 16<sup>th</sup> century under Charles V, who made it the language of the central administration of his Empire, it was only in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, with the proclamation of French as the unique official language of the newly-founded Kingdom of Belgium (1830) and the development of primary education, that the francisation of Brussels really began.

Even though Dutch was made an official language in 1898, this francisation process continued throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century due to two converging tendencies: on the one hand, the increasing use of French by Flemish speakers, who adopted it as a language of social promotion; and, on the other hand, the massive arrival of Francophone Walloons attracted by the job opportunities offered by the capital.

Today, French is, without a doubt, the most common language among Brussels inhabitants. Indeed, a large-scale study conducted at the end of 2011 showed that 88,5% of Brussels inhabitants speak 'good' to 'perfect' French, compared to only 23,2% of Dutch speakers (Janssens 2014: 18). However, the arrival of European and non-European migrants in recent years has brought about a spectacular rise in linguistic diversity: the proportion of Brussels inhabitants who have French as their unique home language fell from 51,7% in 2001 to 33,6% in 2011 (Janssens 2014: 36). As the *de facto* capital of the European Union and the seat of many international institutions, Brussels also increasingly relies on English as a *lingua franca* for external and internal communication, be it between locals and expats or even between French and Flemish-speaking Belgians.



### 3. Linguistic Perspective

As this brief historical account illustrates, 'Belgian French' is all but the result of a homogenous, linear evolution. While French was in extensive contact with local romance languages (Walloon, Picard, Lorrain, and Champenois) in Wallonia, it was exposed to Germanic languages (Flemish and Dutch) in Brussels. Yet, does this mean that Belgian French is made up of two distinct language varieties? No. Indeed, several large-scale studies have shown that Walloon and Brussels speakers share a similar language variety, especially with regard to lexicon (Francard et al. 2010 and 2015). Although the use of certain words and expressions still vary according to speakers' region of origin, the migration, from the 1850s to the 1960s, of thousands of Flemish searching for work in Wallonia coupled with that of Walloons moving to Brussels; along with the density of commercial relations between the North and the South of the country; increased the circulation of many language forms, so that it is now common to hear words of Flemish origin (e.g. *bröl*) in the speech of Walloon speakers, and words of Walloon origin (e.g. *sketter*) in the speech of Brussels speakers (Francard et al. 2015: 12).

One question remains: how different is Belgian French from Hexagonal French? Although in the minds of both Belgian and French speakers, these are two well-distinct varieties, there are objectively very few differences between Belgian French and Hexagonal French. This hardly comes as a surprise, given the two countries' geographic proximity and close ties, together with the inevitable standardization brought along by the media and other supra-local means of communication. Yet, it should be emphasized that distance from standard French varies according to speakers' sociocultural background: the frequency of socially-marked regionalisms increases as one goes down the social class hierarchy. As is often the case with non-standard varieties, most of the specificities observed with regard to Belgian French concern either its phonology or its lexicon. Few differences can be observed regarding morphology and syntax<sup>2</sup>.

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2 One famous distinction lies in the use of the verb *savoir* ('to know') in the sense of *pouvoir* ('can'). Other specificities can be observed in the use of verbal periphrasis (e.g. *avoir bon* for *avoir du plaisir*; *avoir facile* for *avoir des facilités*), pronouns (e.g. *tout qui* for *quiconque*; *leurs deux* for *eux deux*), and adverbs (e.g. *fort* for *très*; *moi, bien* for *moi, si*) (for more details, see Wilmet 1997).

### 3.1 Phonologic Features

Unfortunately, the phonology of Belgian French has not been the subject of any recent large-scale description. Traditionally (see Pohl 1983; Bal et al. 1994; Warnant 1997), it has been described by means of a list of about 10 to 15 traits affecting vowels, consonants, as well as semi-vowels. However, not all of these features enjoy the same status: it is indeed important to distinguish the widespread Belgian traits from the more socially or regionally defined traits.

Widespread Belgian traits are common to all Francophone Belgians and are granted legitimacy within Belgium. They can be described as both 'transregional' and 'transclass'. Due to the standardization process that affects Belgian pronunciation (Hambye, 2005), these features have become few in number, but some are still very much alive. For instance, all Francophone Belgians, regardless of their social class, will likely pronounce an initial "w" as [w] rather than [v] like the French (e.g. *wagon* [wagɔ̃]) (Francard, forthcoming 2016). Other examples of widespread Belgian traits include the maintenance of the distinction between the nasal vowels [ɛ̃] and [œ̃] (e.g. *brin* [bʁɛ̃] vs. *brun* [bʁœ̃]) (Warnant 1997: 170, 174) and the replacement of the semi-vowel [y] with the semi-vowel [w] (e.g. *huit* [wit]), which very few Francophone Belgians will seek to avoid (Warnant 1997: 170).

By contrast, socially/regionally defined Belgian traits are more numerous but are generally associated with specific regional and/or social groups, and therefore have very limited legitimacy. Examples of such traits include word-final consonant devoicing and penultimate vowel lengthening (e.g. *village* [vila:f]; *grande* [gʁɑ̃:t]), which are typical of (but not limited to) the lower-class speakers from Liège (Bauvois 2001: 169–204; Hambye 2005: 89–90), as well as the maintenance of the aspirated "h" (silent in standard French) with a glottal fricative [h] (e.g. *haie* [hej]), which is only heard among a few speakers from the East of Wallonia (Hambye 2005: 89; Warnant 1997: 172).

### 3.2 Lexical Features

In comparison, the Belgian lexicon has been extensively studied. Various dictionaries of Belgicisms (i.e. Belgian French words) have been published, the most recent of which (Francard et al. 2015) gathers more than 2,000 entries.

From a semantic perspective, these Belgicisms can be either encyclopaedic regionalisms or linguistic regionalisms. Encyclopaedic regionalisms refer to specifically Belgian concepts and may thus be used to describe the Belgian gastronomy (e.g. *cuberdon*), folklore (e.g. *kermesse*), administration (e.g. *échevin*), and so forth. By contrast, linguistic regionalisms refer to shared concepts and therefore have

standard French equivalents (e.g. *journal de classe* for *cahier de texte*) (Francard et al. 2015: 13–14; Francard, forthcoming 2016).

Belgicisms can also be of diverse origins: some are archaic forms of the French language (e.g. the meal names *déjeuner*, *dîner*, and *souper*), others are lexical innovations (e.g. *endéans*, *mammotest*), and still others are loanwords, borrowed from local Romance languages (Walloon, Picard, Lorrain, and Champenois; e.g. *bièsse*, *squetter*), neighbouring Germanic languages (Flemish and Dutch; e.g. *zinneke*), or even English (e.g. *socquet*) (Francard, forthcoming 2016).

However, it should be noted that a significant part of these so-called Belgicisms can be found in other regions of the French-speaking world, most notably in the North and East of France. Furthermore, the vast majority of the lexicon that is considered to be standard French is attested in Belgium as much as in France or Switzerland. The Belgian variety of French is thus largely intelligible to speakers of other varieties of French.

## 4. Sociolinguistic Perspectives

### 4.1 Context

The French language has been the object of enduring linguistic purism: authorities have been concerned with maintaining its alleged purity for centuries, and attitudes towards the legitimacy of divergent usages still speak for themselves. Due to their ambiguous position, as ‘users’ but not ‘owners’ of the French language, peripheral French-speaking communities are particularly prone to such purism. In their bid to acquire the same language legitimacy that is rightly enjoyed by French speakers, they have diligently struggled to get rid of any impure usage, often falling into the trap of linguistic hypercorrection.

Francophone Belgium, in particular, has been the scene of a long-standing purist tradition that sought to replace the specificities of Belgian French, considered incorrect, with their legitimate Hexagonal equivalents. Initiated by Poyart in the early nineteenth century, with his book *Flandricismes, Wallonismes et Expressions Impropres dans le Langage Français* (1806), this purist conception endured throughout the nineteenth and twentieth centuries and reached the height of its popularity in the 1970s, with the success of Hanse, Doppagne, and Bourgeois-Gielen’s well-known *Chasse aux Belgicisms* (1971) and *Nouvelle Chasse aux Belgicisms* (1974). The titles of these books (calling for a “witch-hunt for Belgicisms”) very explicitly state the goal of these three Belgian authors: to eliminate all Belgicisms in order to prone a universal, i.e. Hexagonal, variety of French. Indeed, at a time when French was losing its long-held dominance on the scientific and

intellectual scenes in favour of English, defending the unity of the French language implied eliminating all its 'enemies within', starting with its 'improper' regionalisms (Lebouc 2006: 27). However, in the following decades, this inferiority complex progressively gave way to increasing tolerance.

The early 1970s prescriptive *Chasses aux Belgicisms* were followed by Doppagne's more progressive *Belgicisms de Bon Aloi* (1979), which compiled a list of the Belgicisms that were considered worthy of legitimacy under certain conditions (including their aesthetic qualities, their use by Middle-Age or Renaissance authors, their practical advantages over their Hexagonal equivalents, etc.)

Over the past decades, the description and codification of Belgian French was further enhanced by the publication of various inventories of Belgicisms; among which Massion 1987; Lebouc 1998; Delcourt 1998–9; Lebouc 2006 and, more recently, Francard et al. 2010 and 2015, which both received widespread media coverage and popular success. Formerly proscribed and heavily stigmatised, the Belgian lexical particularities have also been gaining legitimacy in the general dictionaries of French, such as *Le (Petit) Robert* and *Le (Petit) Larousse*<sup>3</sup>, and are becoming increasingly visible in the Belgian press (Jacquet 2014).

If a similar evolution has been witnessed throughout peripheral *Francophonie* (see Bouchard et al. 2004; Bavoux, Prudent and Wharton 2008; Remysen 2012), where a growing movement of national affirmation has led peripheral communities to struggle for their right to linguistic autonomy and legitimacy, the specificities of the Belgian context further nurtured this tendency.

Indeed, while the aura of French – as a pure, international, and refined language – was enough to justify its supremacy over Flemish in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century were marked by the growing affirmation of the Flemish movement and the resulting waves of state federalisation (1970, 1980, 1988–89, 1993, 2001, and 2013). In the face of such events, it became necessary for members of the Wallonia-Brussels Federation to define their own regional identity by searching for features of regional pride and unity. The specificities of Belgian French thus gradually emerged as potential objects of value, rather than plain deviations from the norm.

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<sup>3</sup> However, this acceptance is mitigated both by the limited number of Belgicisms featured (around 400 in *Le Petit Robert*) and by the labels that emphasize their regional (i.e. non-standard) nature (Francard, forthcoming 2016).



## 4.2 Language Attitudes

Not only did linguistic purism strongly impacted linguists' descriptions of and attitudes to Belgian French, but it also fuelled a widespread feeling of linguistic insecurity among speakers. A series of sociolinguistic studies conducted in the 1990s (Garsou 1991; Lafontaine 1991; Francard 1993) found that Francophone Belgians refer to '*Hexagonal French*' or '*Parisian French*' as their language standard – a standard from which they are excluded.

As seems to be the tendency in peripheral *Francophonie*, this linguistic subjection to France goes hand in hand with a depreciation of the national variety, considered inferior. Nevertheless, the overt prestige enjoyed by the Hexagonal norm in formal settings finds itself counterbalanced by the significant, albeit more covert, prestige enjoyed by Belgian French in informal settings. In this respect, Lafontaine found that even though teachers from Liège acknowledged the legitimacy and refinement of the Parisian accent, they preferred the warmth of local Belgian accents and were therefore unwilling to adopt the Parisian pronunciation, even disapproving of the Belgian teachers who did (Lafontaine 1986: 119–121).

One study conducted in 1999 by Moreau and her colleagues Brichard and Dupal shed valuable light on these ambivalent attitudes. These researchers asked a group of 126 informants to decide on the correctness and the Belgian origin of a series of seventy words and expressions belonging to seven categories: bourgeois Belgicisms (i.e. Belgicisms associated with the higher classes), working-class Belgicisms (i.e. Belgicisms associated with the lower classes), traits of working-class French (used in France as much as in Belgium), words or expression condemned by the normative discourse, slang, abstract idioms, and concrete idioms.

The results suggested a strong association between the social and the regional variation: while the working-class Belgicisms were successfully recognized as Belgian and generally considered to be incorrect, the bourgeois Belgicisms were not so clearly identified as Belgian, nor were they systematically perceived as incorrect. In other words, if the bourgeois Belgicisms are granted legitimacy among Francophone Belgians, the working-class Belgicisms (especially those whose dialectal origin is readily apparent) remain heavily stigmatized and associated with the lower-classes. Even more surprisingly, participants considered both the traits of working-class French and the words or expression condemned by the normative discourse not only as incorrect, but also as Belgian.

Bearing on these findings, Moreau, Brichard, and Dupal described Francophone Belgians' language attitudes and practices in terms of 'double distance' – distance from both standard Hexagonal French and working-class Belgian French – and

identified the prestige norm among Francophone Belgium as the variety used by the "Belgian cultural bourgeoisie" (Moreau, Brichard, and Dupal 1999: 30, 33).

Yet, as shown by Hambye and Francard (2008), this variety is not an *endogenous* norm *stricto sensu* (see definition by Manessy 1997). Indeed, it is used only by the most educated speakers, generally in formal contexts, and has become increasingly associated with the Brussels region (and, to a certain extent, the province of Walloon Brabant), which hosts the country's major cultural and economic institutions (Hambye 2000; Francard and Franke 2005).

As such, it cannot be the object of widespread affective adhesion and symbolic identification on the part of Francophone Belgians, many of whom remain strongly attached to their local, regionally-marked varieties (Snyers 2014). Moreover, even though they have become unquestionably more willing to tolerate Belgian language traits (especially with regard to their lexicon; see Francard 2010) and to question the absolute legitimacy of the Hexagonal norm (especially when associated with Paris; see Francard 2001; Francard and Franke 2002; Francard and Franke 2005), Hexagonal French remains the variety of reference in formal or official contexts for an important number of Francophone Belgians. Ironically, the reason behind the positive evaluation of the variety used by the Belgian cultural bourgeoisie precisely lies in... its apparent lack of endogenous traits (Hambye and Francard 2008: 52–53).

Thus, Francophone Belgians have not yet gone so far as to replace the French model with their own, endogenous norm: if linguistic legitimacy is no longer *exclusively* associated to France, hesitation remains as to which variety of reference could enjoy both the prestige of a legitimate, official variety and the sympathy of a local, popular variety (Francard, forthcoming 2016).

## 5. Conclusion

The purpose of this paper was to examine the changing dynamics of Belgian French. As suggested by the ambivalent attitudes that Francophone Belgians hold towards their national variety, together with the dichotomy between legitimate and illegitimate phonological and lexical features of Belgian French, diverging tendencies are at work: on the one hand, centrifugal forces that allow Belgian French to take increasing distance from Hexagonal French, to take over its own specificities, and thereby to aim for greater autonomy and legitimacy; and, on the other hand, centripetal forces that lead Belgian French to converge with Hexagonal French either in the name of linguistic purism or as part of a growing process of language standardization.



How can we make sense of these diverging dynamics? Will Francophone Belgians eventually raise Belgian French to the rank of a legitimate variety in a pluricentric *Francophonie*, or are they doomed to disregard their linguistic specificities?

In this respect, Hambye and Romainville (2013) have argued that the prestige language norm that serves as a model for Francophone Belgians is no longer precisely defined, nor explicitly valued. Indeed, the national criterion which was formally used to condemn the Belgian phonological and lexical traits no longer seems relevant. Today, the Belgian origin of a word or phonological trait is not enough to justify its incorrectness, and to speak properly does not simply mean to speak “like the French”. In other words, the frontier between ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ in language usage does not follow the national boarder as it used to.

Nevertheless, if Francophone Belgians are less likely to frown upon their own specificities, they have maintained an essentialist vision of the French language and remain unwilling to acknowledge the arbitrary nature of linguistic norms (Hambye and Romainville 2013; Klinkenberg 2001). Far from considering language simply as a set of conventions that is put at their disposal, Francophone Belgians regard French as a concrete object that exists for itself and that should be respected – even protected – for what it *is*<sup>4</sup>. As shown by Romainville (2011), they believe that certain language forms are *intrinsically* correct or incorrect, and strive to justify their judgments using “objective” criteria (e.g. logic, coherence, richness, complexity, comprehensibility, etc.)

Yet, by failing to acknowledge the social motivation behind the definition of linguistic correctness, their discourse reinforces the stigmatization and exclusion of the dominated classes, and anchors the legitimacy of the dominant classes. Thus, in spite of the evolution observed in Francophone Belgians’ attitudes to Belgian French, their normative discourse still serves the same purpose: to naturalize social hierarchies, and to perpetuate social inequalities.

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