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## Multiple languages, multiple identities? Children's language characteristics and their ethnic and national identification

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### ABSTRACT

An increasing number of ethnolinguistic minority children in European cities grow up multilingual, being proficient in more than one language. Current public and political debates often insinuate that these children's language behaviour is a reflection of their identification with and integration in society. Though some empirical studies have corroborated this idea, others have contested it, suggesting that a more detailed analysis of the identity-language link is advisable. This quantitative study investigates if and how language practices, language exposure and language proficiencies differentially shape identification with the majority group and the ethnolinguistic minority group among a sample of primary school children ( $N = 528$ ; ages 10–12) living in Antwerp, Belgium. Our results suggest that identification with these two groups involves separate processes and as such, this study helps to nuance the polarised public and political debate in Belgium about the role of language as an indicator of integration. In addition, the findings suggest that the essentializing of language within formal institutions such as schools, may contribute to the large share of children reporting that they strongly identify with the ethnolinguistic minority group as compared to the number of children strongly identifying with Belgium.

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## Introduction

It's a common assumption that language and cultural identity are intricately connected. Especially among ethnolinguistic minority groups, heritage language (HL) maintenance may be vital to feelings of ethnic solidarity, belonging and continuity (Jaspal, 2009), while the ability to communicate in the official language of the institutions such as government offices or schools (institutional language; henceforth IL) is a crucial tool to be able to become part of and identify with the nation (Blommaert, 2013).

Understanding the connection between language and identification matters because individuals who identify strongly with their heritage country (i.e. ethnic identification) and at the same time, have a strong connection with the destination country (i.e. national identification) do better in various life domains (e.g. psychological well-being, academic achievement and family relations) (Nguyen & Benet-Martínez, 2013).

However, the majority of the studies focusing on the link between language and forms of cultural identity have focused *either* on ethnic identification *or* on national identification (see e.g. de Vroome, Verkuyten, & Martinovic, 2014; Kemppainen, Hilton, & Rannut, 2015). One study that has incorporated both types of identification indicates that language characteristics affect ethnic and national identification in different ways. Some characteristics only affect national identification, others only the identification with the ethnic group and still others influence both types of identification (Schroeder, Lam, & Marian, 2017).

Here, we study and extend the literature on the language-identity link by investigating how three language characteristics – practice, exposure and proficiency – influence the ethnic and national identification of multilingual pre-adolescent children (aged 10–12) living in the ethnically diverse city of Antwerp, Flanders, in the Dutch-speaking region of Belgium. Our results suggest that language characteristics are differentially associated with ethnic and national identification, providing further evidence that these identification processes are distinct from one another. Thus, cultural identification should be regarded as multidimensional instead of a mere continuum.

## Literature review

### *Language as a symbol of cultural identity*

The idea that language and cultural identity are strongly intertwined is predominantly grounded in the intricate connection between language and culture. As Brown states (2000, p. 165): ‘A language is a part of a culture and a culture is a part of a language; the two are intricately interwoven so that one cannot separate the two without losing the significance of language or culture’. Experimental studies among bicultural individuals show that language can be used as a tool to activate different cultural patterns related to cultural norms, values and attitudes (Huynh, Nguyen, & Benet-Martínez, 2011). But the fact that language and culture are highly intertwined, does not necessarily imply that language and cultural identity also coincide.

The link between language and cultural identity is attributed to the ability of language to connect individuals with each other by creating ‘a shared culture’, suggesting the idea of a common identity. That shared language may then function as a strong symbol of the social group (Jaspal, 2009). And indeed, the same studies demonstrating the potential of language to activate norms and values patterns also show that cultural identity descriptions change depending on the primed language (Huynh et al., 2011). But the symbolic function of language as a group marker is not universal. Members from ethnolinguistic minority groups can remain strongly connected to their heritage country, without maintaining their language. For example, Extra and Yagmur (2010) report that Dutch-Turkish adolescents identify strongly with the Turkish language but Dutch-Moroccan youngsters identify first and foremost with Islam. Core value theory suggests that cultures vary in the types of markers or symbols they perceive to be central to the cultural identity of that group (Smolicz, 1981). Language is only one of several potential ‘core values’ of a culture, alongside religion, cultural norms (such as familism) and/or specific cultural praxis (e.g. typical food or feasts). In other words, if language is not considered to be a core value, it loses its function as an ethnic identity marker.

Furthermore, the function of language as a core value depends on the specific social context in which ethnolinguistic minority groups find themselves. Language plays a pivotal role in demarcating the group in situations where the group's existence is threatened by a hostile context (Giles, Bourhis, & Taylor, 1977). In Belgium, where our study is situated, tensions between language groups have played a major role in public and political life, ever since it became an independent state in 1830 (Mettewie & Janssens, 2007).

Currently, a strict language border exists between three language regions: Flanders in the north, Wallonia in the south and the bilingual Brussels Region in the centre of the country. This border reflects the ongoing efforts of the Flemish Movement to elevate the status of Dutch in public life, a reaction to the social, economic and political discrimination against Dutch-speakers in Flanders by the French-speaking elite during the nineteenth century (Willemyns, 2002). Through the Flemish struggle, Flanders perceives itself as a 'Volk': a cultural community defined by a sense of common history, language and religion. Consequently, the emphasis on language as a defining characteristic of the community is much more emphatic in Flanders than in other language regions of Belgium (Pulinx & Van Avermaet, 2015).

This situation makes it difficult for newcomers to comfortably fit into Flemish society (Loobuyck & Jacobs, 2009). Children of immigrants are also subjected to the this legitimisation process. Language practices of these children are perceived by politicians and the general public as the cause of their 'problematic' integration in society (Pulinx & Van Avermaet, 2015). For example, the gap in the educational success between natives and pupils with a migration background has been attributed to the language 'deprivation' of children with a non-Dutch mother tongue, despite scientific studies dismissing this lay theory (Agirdag, Jordens, & Van Houtte, 2014; Groenez, Nicaise, & De Rick, 2009). The emotionally charged Flemish context regarding language and identity raises a key question about the degree to which Dutch, the Flemish IL, contributes to children's identification with Belgium, the majority of whom are national citizens.

### *Distinguishing between language practice, exposure and proficiency*

Language is a multi-faceted phenomenon. The relationship between language and cultural identification can differ depending on the language characteristic under investigation (Schroeder et al., 2017). We focus here on three language characteristics – practice, exposure and proficiency – as we believe these most strongly affect children's ability to connect with their social environments, which is crucial for establishing an emotional connection between language and identity.

#### *Language practice*

In general, using the HL seems to foster individuals' identification with the heritage group (Geerlings, Verkuyten, & Thijs, 2015) while language acculturation or language shift is associated with increasing identification with the host society (Kalbach & Pigott, 2005). However, most of the quantitative studies on the impact of language practice have not made a distinction between the different functions of language.

Among speakers of more than one language, the language used for everyday communication (e.g. to talk about the weather) and the language that feels most emotional (emotional language) do not necessarily coincide. For example, the MARS-study on

multilingual children in Flemish schools reported that teachers noticed an increased switch to the HL when pupils tried to articulate their emotions (de Backer et al., 2015). If language is a cultural identity marker, this implies an emotional connection between the speaker and his or her language. Thus, emotional language use preferences of children might be a better predictor of cultural identification than general language use patterns.

Ethnolinguistic minority members, particularly children, often engage in the practice of language brokering. In most cases, children act as a language broker at the request of their parents, because children's knowledge of the IL exceeds that of the parents (Tyyskä, 2013). Brokering can contribute to the development of ethnic identity among adolescents. When someone is interpreting, they also fulfil the role of a cultural broker. In fact, a good broker is defined by his or her ability to understand and to convey cultural interpretations to two different worlds. However, the positive relationship between brokering and ethnic identification seems conditional upon individuals' feelings about brokering (Weisskirch, 2005). In the literature, there is much debate on how children experience brokering. While some studies suggests that children appreciate this role of cultural mediator, others find that children do not like the responsibilities brokering entails and experience considerable stress when required to serve this function (Shen, Tilton, & Kim, 2017).

Our first research question is: How are individual language practices associated with children's ethnic and national identification (RQ1)?

### *Language exposure*

Cultural identification of children is not strictly an individual affair. Exposure to culture through social environments (family, schools, neighbourhood, peers, leisure activities) is crucial to the development of cultural identity and belonging among youth (Gonzales-Backen, 2013). The family is a particularly significant player in the cultural socialisation process. Children are first socialised into their heritage culture within their family. Furthermore, if the broader environment isn't reflective of one's ethnic heritage (e.g. in very 'white' neighbourhoods), the family may be the only socialisation setting through which children can receive messages about their cultural heritage (Umaña-Taylor & Yazedjian, 2006). Within the family is also where culture and language first coincide when children learn about their cultural heritage by hearing and talking about it with family members.

In addition, the family is the key site of HL transmission because the HL is seldom supported by the larger societal context (Fishman, 2000). When parents consider the language as crucial to their cultural heritage, the motivation to use the HL with their children is high (Zhang & Slaughter-Defoe, 2009). But if parents are less oriented towards their ethnocultural heritage, they might be less likely to use the HL. Consequently, an association between parental language practices and the cultural identification of children is a likely outcome.

The more children are exposed to a language, the more opportunities they have to identify with that language. Thus siblings' language use may also affect children's cultural identification, especially for children in late childhood or early adolescence (10–12 year olds). At this age, peers gain significant sway as socialisation agents (Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2011) and relationships between siblings are often emotionally intense (Dunn, 2014).

Beyond the family, children spend most of their time at school. Parents' school choice is another way to control the language exposure of children, outside of the family context (Schwartz, Moin, & Klayle, 2013). Schools with many pupils who share the same HL, could be effective HL transmission hubs compared to schools where few other children

share the mother tongue, and time spent with ethnic minority peers affects children's identification as well (Phinney, Romero, Nava, & Huang, 2001). Moreover, schools like other social settings, have their own language policy (Spolsky, 2004). Flemish schools are notorious for their Dutch-only attitude, with many schools prohibiting or even punishing HL use on school grounds (Agirdag, 2010). Obviously this can affect children's feelings of cultural belonging.

Lastly, studies have increasingly pointed to the impact of media on children's language use within the family (Li, 2006). The more children are confronted with the IL via television, internet use or communication via social media, the more this type of language exposure and at the same time, cultural exposure to the majority society might alter the link between language and cultural identification.

Our second research question therefore is: How is the amount of language exposure within the social environment of children associated with their ethnic and national identification (RQ2)?

### *Language proficiency*

Oh and Fuligni (2010) state that part of the confusion about the language-ethnic identity link is due to the fact that language use and language proficiency have been used interchangeably. But the two characteristics are clearly distinct concepts: children can be less proficient in their HL than the IL but still choose to use that HL when communicating with family members because of the association between the family context and the HL or because of the limited IL skills of family members. On the other hand, the more proficient children are in a language, the more likely it is that they will use it (Grosjean, 2010). Thus, incorporating only one of the two dimensions may distort the influence of either use or proficiency because it partially reflects the other dimension. When HL proficiency and HL use are both included as predictors of ethnic identification, HL proficiency proves to be a stronger predictor than HL use (Oh & Fuligni, 2010). However, the meta-analysis of Mu (2015), focusing on the association between the HL proficiency and ethnic identification, showed that this association is only moderately strong.

Our third research question is: How are children's language proficiencies associated with their ethnic and national identification (RQ3)?

## **Data & method**

### *Data*

We use data from the Multilingualism in Antwerp project (Dekeyser, 2016) which gathered information of 1049 children (aged 10–12) attending the 5th and 6th year of primary school in 19 schools in Antwerp. Antwerp is the largest city in Flanders and provides an especially interesting venue for this study because it is very ethnically and thus linguistically diverse: over 170 different nationalities are counted in the civil register. Over half of the population is of foreign descent, increasing to over 70% among the younger age groups (Studiedienst van de Vlaamse Regering, 2018).

Schools were selected with a disproportional quota sampling method, oversampling schools with a high percentage of low SES pupils and children with a non-Dutch mother tongue. The online survey was administered in Dutch and conducted at school,

during school hours under supervision of the first author and at least one research assistant. All data used in this study are self-reports by the child respondents.

Our analyses are based on information from children who indicated that they spoke at least one language at home other than Dutch. Children who reported a deceased parent were excluded from the analysis since the loss of a parent can severely alter the language exposure and practices of the child. We restricted the sample to children of Moroccan, Turkish, Eastern-European and mixed heritage, as other ethnicities were too few to constitute separate analytical categories. Third generation children in the sample were too few to include in the analysis ( $N = 7$ ). These restrictions resulted in a subsample size of 528 children.

### *Operationalisation of variables*

Below, we report the construction of the variables used for our analysis. The table with the corresponding distributions, means, range and standard deviations can be consulted in Appendix.

#### *Independent variables*

**Language practices.** Children reported which language they mostly used to communicate with their mother and father at home. A variable 'Language Mostly Used by Child to Talk to Parents' was constructed with four categories: (1) mostly Dutch with mother and father, (2) mostly Dutch with mother but a non-Dutch language with father, (3) mostly a non-Dutch language with mother but Dutch with father and (4) mostly a non-Dutch language with both parents. Emotional language preference when feeling happy has three categories: (1) the HL, (2) Dutch, or (3) both languages. Emotional language preference when feeling sad was measured in the same manner. Lastly, children reported how often on a scale from '1' (never) to '4' (on a daily basis) they acted as a language broker during three activities: translating at school, during doctor visits and during daily activities such as shopping at a bakery or supermarket. By summing these three items, we constructed an internally consistent (Cronbach's alpha: 0.80) 'Language Brokering' scale ranging from 0 to 12.

**Language exposure.** Children were asked to indicate which language their mother, father, and siblings mostly used when communicating with them. 'Language Used by Parents to Talk to Child' has four categories: (1) father and mother use mostly Dutch, (2) mother uses mostly Dutch but father uses a non-Dutch language, (3) father uses mostly Dutch but mother uses a non-Dutch language and (4) both parents mostly use a non-Dutch language. The variable describing siblings' use of the HL use with the child respondent was coded dichotomously with '1' indicating that siblings mostly used a non-Dutch language with the child. The variable describing whether siblings used Dutch with the child is coded in a parallel fashion.<sup>1</sup> The reported number of non-Dutch languages is a binary variable with '1' indicating two or more non-Dutch languages are spoken in the household. The binary variable 'Watching Television in Dutch' indicates whether or not children prefer Dutch (coded as 1) or another language (coded as 0). Lastly, children's perception of their school's policy towards the use of the HL by pupils consists of four categories: (1) always allowed, (2) sometimes allowed, (3) never allowed and (4) I don't know.

**Language proficiency.** Children were asked how well they understood, spoke, write and read Dutch and the HL on a scale from 1 to 5. However, since a large number of the children have an oral HL (e.g. Moroccan Berber languages), the proficiency measurement in the HL and Dutch was restricted to calculating the mean of the understanding and speaking items.

**Socio-demographics.** Girls are coded as '1'. The ethnic ancestry of the children is coded into four categories: (1) Moroccan, (2) Eastern-European, (3) Turkish and (4) children from interethnic or mixed partnerships. The variable 'Migration Generation', distinguishes first generation children (children who were born abroad) from second generation (children born in Belgium with both parents born abroad) and 2.5 generation children (children were born in Belgium and have one parent that is born in Belgium). Lastly, children reported how frequently from '1' (never) to '5' (daily) their mother, father or other family members taught them about their heritage country. An internally consistent scale (Cronbach's alpha: 0.83) was constructed ranging from 0 to 12. The variable 'Socialisation Messages about Belgium' (Cronbach's alpha: 0.83) follows the same coding.

### **Dependent variables**

**Cultural identification.** Children reported a value from 1 to 5 on how much they feel Belgian and how much they feel 'X', based on their reported HL (e.g. if they reported Turkish as their HL when asked: 'Do you feel Turkish?'). Moroccan children filled in an extra question on how much they identified with being Moroccan since 'Moroccan' is not an official language and Moroccan families in Belgium tend to speak either Moroccan Arabic or a Berber language, depending on their region of origin (Surkyn & Reniers, 1997). The distribution of both variables was heavily skewed leading us to construct two binary variables with children reporting a score of 4 or 5 being coded as 1. 82% of the children report that they strongly identify with their heritage country. This is double the percentage of children that report that they strongly identify with Belgium (40%).

### **Method**

We estimated binomial logistic regression models of the likelihood of a child strongly identifying with their heritage country and with Belgium. Several background characteristics were included in the models to assess the net effects of language practice, exposure and proficiency.

We used the 'proc genmod' procedure in SAS because it includes a 'repeated measure' statement. This statement estimates robust standard errors which correct for possible dependence among the repeated observations (Allison, 1999). This is necessary since data might be potentially clustered within the primary sampling unit (schools). We chose this method instead of the standard multilevel analysis models because of the relatively small number of schools in the sample and because there was no significant variance between schools. Cases with missing values were list-wise deleted, except for variables with 25 missings or more where the mean of the original scale was imputed. All models were evaluated for multicollinearity and no problems were found (all VIF coefficients were under 10).



## Results

Table 1 shows the significant coefficients (and standard errors) for the complete model predicting the child's identification with the ethnolinguistic minority group (the first column) or with Belgium (the second column).

Children who use Dutch with their mother and a non-Dutch language with their father are less likely to strongly identify with Belgium than children who speak a non-Dutch language with both parents ( $p < .01$ ). Ethnic identification is not associated with the language practice of the child with his or her parents.

**Table 1.** Logistic regression models predicting the log odds of a child strongly identifying with the heritage country and Belgium.

	Identification with ethnolinguistic minority group	Identification with Belgium
Intercept	-1.25 (.81)	-1.83 (.68)
	Language practice	
Use of Dutch by child <sup>a</sup>		
Dutch for mother & father	n.s	n.s
Dutch for mother only	n.s	-.99** (.34)
Dutch for father only	n.s	n.s
	Language preference when happy <sup>b</sup>	
Dutch	-1.99*** (.60)	n.s
Dutch and the HL	-1.23* (.59)	-.62* (.28)
	Language preference when sad <sup>c</sup>	
Dutch	n.s	n.s
Dutch and the HL	.66* (.32)	n.s
Language brokering	.04* (.02)	.04* (.02)
	Language exposure	
	Use of Dutch by parents <sup>d</sup>	
Dutch by mother & father	n.s	n.s
Dutch by mother only	n.s	n.s
Dutch by father only	n.s	n.s
IL by sibs (Yes = 1)		n.s
HL by sibs (Yes = 1)	.63** (.25)	
Watching Dutch TV	n.s	n.s
>1 Non-Dutch lang. (Yes = 1)	n.s	n.s
	School policy use of HL <sup>e</sup>	
Always allowed	n.s	n.s
Sometimes allowed	n.s	n.s
Don't know	-.54* (.28)	n.s
	Language proficiency	
HL proficiency of Child	.33** (.13)	n.s
Dutch proficiency of Child	.22 (.15)	n.s
	Socio-demographics	
Ethnicity <sup>f</sup>		
East-EU	n.s	n.s
Turkish	-1.09*** (.32)	n.s
Mixed	-1.43*** (.37)	.64** (.23)
	Generational status <sup>g</sup>	
2nd gen.	.55+ (.30)	.59* (.26)
2.5 gen.	.65+ (.39)	1.43*** (.39)
Gender (Girl = 1)	n.s	n.s
Socialisation Belgium		.13*** (.03)
Socialisation heritage country	.11*** (.02)	
QIC	429	646
QICu	438	655

Note: Numbers in parentheses are standard errors. + $p < 0.10$ . \* $p .05$ . \*\* $p .01$ . \*\*\* $p .001$  N.S. refers to non-statistically significant results. Full models are available upon request. <sup>a</sup>Reference Cat. is Non-Dutch for Both Parents. <sup>b</sup>Reference Cat. is only HL. <sup>c</sup>Reference Cat. is only HL. <sup>d</sup>Reference Cat. is Non-Dutch by Both Parents. <sup>e</sup>Reference Cat. is Never Allowed. <sup>f</sup>Reference Cat. is Moroccan. <sup>g</sup>Reference Cat. is 1st generation.

Children's preference for Dutch ( $p < .001$ ) or for both languages ( $p < .05$ ) when they feel happy significantly decreases the probability that they identify strongly with the ethnolinguistic group while preferring Dutch and the HL decreases the likelihood that children strongly identify with Belgium (though the effect is less pronounced;  $p < .05$ ). Language preference when feeling sad is only related to children's ethnic identification: compared to children who prefer the HL, those who prefer both languages are more likely to strongly identify with their ethnolinguistic group ( $p < .05$ ). Lastly, the more children have to broker, the more likely it is that they report a higher level of ethnic ( $p < .05$ ) and national identification ( $p < .05$ ).

Language exposure variables do not affect children's identification with Belgium and only two variables influence ethnic identification levels. The use of the HL by siblings is positively associated with the likelihood that children strongly identify with their heritage country ( $p < .05$ ). Next, the probability of high ethnic identification decreases for children who aren't sure what their school's attitude is towards the use of the HL compared to children who think that their school never allows them to use their HL ( $p < .05$ ).

With regards to language proficiencies of children, the results show that whether or not children perceive themselves to be very proficient in Dutch is not linked to either type of cultural identification. HL proficiency does significantly increase the likelihood of the child strongly identifying with their ethnolinguistic group ( $p < .01$ ) but this is not paralleled in the Belgian identification model.

Lastly, there are considerable differences in how the socio-demographic characteristics are associated with children's cultural identification. The probability of strongly identifying with the ethnolinguistic minority group is lower for Turkish children ( $p < .001$ ) and children of mixed descent ( $p < .001$ ) compared to Moroccan children, but Moroccan children do not differ from Turkish children in their reported identification with Belgium. The likelihood of reporting a high level of ethnic identification is higher for second ( $p < .10$ ) and 2.5 migration generation ( $p < .10$ ) children than for first generation children. The same pattern is found for identification with Belgium ( $p_{2nd\ gen} < .05$ ;  $p_{2.5gen} < .001$ ). Lastly, the more children receive socialisation messages about their heritage country, the more likely it is that children report a high level of ethnic identification ( $p < .001$ ). The same pattern is found for Belgian socialisation and Belgian identification ( $p < .001$ ).

## Summary & discussion

More and more children in European cities grow up with a language at home that is not shared by the larger society. (Grand)children of immigrants often shift towards the IL at the expense of the HL which can affect their sense of belonging to their ethnolinguistic group (Mu, 2015). At the same time, gaining proficiency in the IL might foster children's connection with the nation state, rendering the association between language and cultural identification processes more complex. Motivated by these themes, we investigated if and how three language characteristics – practice, exposure and proficiency – differentially shape identification with Belgium (national identification) and the ethnolinguistic minority group (ethnic identification) among a sizeable sample of primary school children (aged 10–12) in Antwerp, Belgium.

Our results provide further evidence that national and ethnic identification are two distinct processes, suggesting two independent axes instead of a mere continuum (Berry,

2005). Only one language characteristic, brokering, shapes both types of identification in the same, positive, way. This finding confirms the hypothesis that brokering involves not only translating between two languages but also interpreting and mediating between two cultures. Brokering therefore contributes to a child's understanding and feeling of belonging to those two cultural realms (Weisskirch, 2005).

With regards to our first research question, our study further highlights the importance of children's own language practices in shaping their cultural identification patterns. First of all, we find that the more a child shifts towards the use of Dutch when feeling happy, the more it decreases children's identification with the ethnolinguistic group. However, such clear acculturation patterns are not found for children's identification with Belgium. Only children who prefer both languages in positive emotion situations seem less likely to strongly identify as Belgian. One interpretation might be that when children are in this type of 'language maze', it restricts their possibilities to fully emotionally connect themselves with either cultural group (cfr. the classical 'no-mans land'). For negative emotion situations, the patterns are also not clear. This difference between positively and negatively emotionally charged situations seems in line with De Leersnyder, Mesquita, and Kim's (2011) study of emotional acculturation among adults that showed immigrants' emotional acculturation to the host society is higher in positive emotional situations than in negative ones. Given these results, future studies on the language-identity link would benefit by incorporating detailed measures of emotional language preferences in various emotion situations.

Another interesting finding involves the influence of children's differential language use with mother and father at home on their identification with Belgium. In cultures with more traditional gender roles, as is likely to be the case in our sample, fathers are assumed to be the provider of the family, the authority figure and the representative of the family in the public domain (i.e. the majority society) (Pels, 2000). Thus, IL use and proficiency is more vital for fathers than mothers to successfully perform their roles. And indeed, immigrant men tend to be more fluent in the IL than women (van Tubergen & Kalmijn, 2009). If a child then explicitly chooses to use the HL with the father and Dutch with the mother, this language choice might reflect children's perception of the less important role or status of Dutch and as such, a decreased sense of belonging to the Belgian society.

Turning our attention to our second research question, we surprisingly found that the amount of language exposure by the social environment hardly affects children's cultural identification patterns. Siblings do play a modest role, but their influence is limited to ethnic identification. This finding might be related to the common observation that siblings tend to shift towards the use of the IL with each other (Kheirkhah & Cekaite, 2017). So when siblings deviate from this language shift, it is to be expected that it is more consequential for children's ideas regarding group belonging, especially since peers become prominent socialisation agents in this age category (Goodwin & Kyratzis, 2011). The role of the school's HL policy is less straightforward. Contrary to expectations, we found no significant differences between schools that allow the use of the HL versus schools that don't allow it. However, children who are unsure about the school's policy are less likely to report strong ethnic identification levels. One hypothesis is that children who are unsure about the policy already do not care enough to find out what the policy is which in turn, might be an indication of a lesser emotional connection to their ethnolinguistic group.

Lastly, with regards to our third research question, our results clearly demonstrate the differential influence of HL and IL proficiency on children's cultural identification patterns. Although HL proficiency predicts children's feeling of belonging to their ethnolinguistic group, it is not related to their feeling of being Belgian. Even more interesting is the finding that being proficient in Dutch is also not associated with feeling Belgian. The latter result might be due to the context in which our study is situated. As Belgium is a multilingual country with regions that have their own official language, associating Dutch with Belgium is not necessarily straightforward for ethnolinguistic minority children since being Belgian cannot be reduced to speaking Dutch. This result and the lower explained variance of the Belgian identification model are in line with previous studies indicating that national identities are more difficult to predict than ethnic identities. While the latter is often grafted on minority-majority differences, the former is more diffuse because of the intra-group diversity (Sabatier, 2008).

### **Implications**

Some of our results run counter popular beliefs in Belgium and abroad and are important for policy debates surrounding language and integration. Children's language proficiencies are not an indicator of their attitude towards the majority society, as is often assumed. Furthermore, the fact that we found no influence of within-family language use on children's national identification is important to underline since HL maintenance within ethnolinguistic minority families is often frowned upon by the majority population and regarded as a hindrance to the socio-cultural integration of the children by politicians.

In addition, our study brings important warnings for educational professionals and policy makers. The results of the generation variable on identification with the ethnolinguistic minority group and the apparent heightened salience of the ethnic identity compared to Belgian identity, suggests that children feel the need to underline their belonging to their ethnolinguistic group more than to society at large. Previous studies in the US among Hispanics also report this type of heightened ethnic identity salience. Scholars suggest that faced with a hostile reception by the host society and significant discrimination, minority members come to define who they are in opposition to who they are not (i.e. *reactive ethnicity*) (Rumbaut, 2008).

The children in our sample already have reason to believe that their identity as Belgian is threatened. Studies on Belgian schools have found that children who speak a non-Dutch language at home are continuously labelled as non-Dutch speakers (Agirdag, 2010). This could lead these children to believe that society draws an impenetrable distinction between Dutch-speaking children and the 'Others', since in this developmental stage they are very susceptible to social comparison (Charlesworth, Wood, & Viggiani, 2008). The essentialising of language makes it impossible to become an equal member of the majority society.

### **Limitations of the study**

The results of this analysis should be interpreted with some caution because capturing cultural identification through survey reports remains a difficult task (Ong, Fuller-Rowell, & Phinney, 2010). Though the measurement used in the study was included because we wanted to know if children *feel* Belgian/Moroccan/Turkish etc. (i.e. identification), we

could have measured children's idea about *being* part of a cultural group (i.e. self-categorization) instead (Verkuyten, 2010). In addition, previous studies have found that feelings of cultural belonging are not static but contextually variable, depending on the social structural characteristics of the situation at hand and the people present in that social setting. In our survey, the majority of the questions concerned the family which might have biased children's answers since family is strongly associated with increased ethnic identity salience reports (Yip & Douglass, 2013). Furthermore, our study design oversampled low SES schools which are often situated in neighbourhoods with a large immigrant population (Jacobs & Rea, 2011). This combination of the neighbourhood and the school composition could have increased ethnic salience for our respondents. The large differences found between the Moroccan children and the other ethnicities in particular, might be partly related to the explicit references made by the mayor of Antwerp (also the leader of the Flemish nationalist party) about the problematic Moroccan integration during the time of the data collection (De Morgen, 2015). Lastly, the language measures we used in this study are only rough proxies of children's actual language repertoires. As Blommaert and Backus (2012) rightly state, these repertoires are much more fine-grained and dynamic. Complementing our results with data from qualitative studies, would thus provide interesting venues for future research. Overall, when interpreting our results, it is important to remember that we only looked at dominant language use which is not equivalent to the layered phenomenon that multilingualism is (de Backer et al., 2015).

## Note

1. The exposure to the HL by siblings and exposure to Dutch by siblings do not necessarily mirror each other. Children were asked to indicate which language they predominantly used when talking with their younger versus older siblings (if present). Therefore, the two variables could differ according to the parity of the sibling(s). Single children got the code 0.

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## Appendix

**Table A1.** Frequencies, means, standard deviations and ranges of variables for children reporting to speak one or more language(s) in addition to Dutch at home.

Variable	Mean or percentage	Standard deviation	Range
Dependent variables			
Strong identification with heritage country ( <i>Yes</i> = 1)	82.38 (416)		
Strong identification with Belgium ( <i>Yes</i> = 1)	39.84 (204)		
Language practices			
Language used by child to talk to parents			
Dutch for mother & father	12.36 (65)		
Dutch for mother only	16.54 (87)		
Dutch for father only	13.69 (72)		
Non-Dutch for mother & father	57.41 (302)		
Language preference when feeling happy			
Only HL	23.75 (124)		
Only Dutch	44.06 (230)		
Dutch and HL	32.18 (168)		
Language preference when feeling sad			
Only HL	31.27 (162)		
Only Dutch	39.77 (206)		
Dutch and HL	28.96 (150)		
Language brokering <sup>+</sup>	3.07	3.74	0–12
Language exposure			
Language used by parents to talk to child			
Mother & father use Dutch	11.24 (59)		
Only mother uses Dutch	14.86 (78)		
Only father uses Dutch	15.24 (80)		
Mother & father use non-Dutch	58.67 (308)		
Exposure to Dutch by siblings	72.95 (383)		
Exposure to HL by siblings	21.71 (114)		
> 1 Non-Dutch language ( <i>Yes</i> = 1)	24.52 (129)		
Watching TV in Dutch			
Watching TV in Dutch	68.45 (358)		
School's policy towards use of HL			
HL always allowed	6.54 (34)		
HL sometimes allowed	14.62 (76)		
HL never allowed	60.19 (313)		
Child does not know	18.65 (97)		
Language proficiency			
Dutch proficiency child	4.57	.62	1–5
HL proficiency child	4.29	.92	1–5
Socio-demographics			
Ethnicity			
Moroccan	56.25 (297)		
East-EU	19.51 (103)		
Turkish	12.69 (67)		
Mixed	11.55 (61)		
Generational status			
1st	29.92 (158)		

(Continued)



**Table A1.** Continued.

Variable	Mean or percentage	Standard deviation	Range
2nd	48.11 (254)		
2.5	21.97 (116)		
Gender ( <i>Girl</i> = 1)	48.86 (258)		
Socialisation messages about H.C. <sup>+</sup>	6.85	3.30	0–12
Socialisation Messages about Belgium <sup>+</sup>	5.12	3.55	0–12

Note: Number in parentheses are absolute frequencies. Variables indicated with <sup>+</sup> are imputed with the mean for missing values.