

Flemish language policy in an era of globalisation

by Barbara De Cock

Abstract

In this article, I will discuss the Flemish language policy. After a short description of the position of Flanders in a globalised world (1), I will comment on some concrete challenges for the Flemish educational system (2), such as the integration of non-Dutch-speaking students (2.1). Furthermore, I will dwell on the ways the Flemish community prepares its youngsters to life in a globalised society, referring to European criteria (mother-tongue plus two) and tools (Common European Framework of Reference, Erasmus exchanges) (2.2). Finally, I will discuss the role of foreign language promotion institutions in the Flemish educational area (2.3).

Summary

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1. Flanders in a globalising world

Belgium was created in 1830 after its secession of the Netherlands. The upper-class population was French-speaking, both in Flanders and Wallonia. In Flanders, there was in addition a diglossic situation with French as the 'high' variant and Dutch as the 'low' one. As a consequence, Dutch was absent from official life in the early days of the Belgian kingdom, even though it was being spoken by half of the population (Lamarcq – Rogge 1992). This diglossic situation lies at the basis of a strong defensive attitude towards French in modern-day Flanders.

Dutch has gradually acquired more linguistic status and rights, such as its use in education, jurisdiction and legislation. In the 2nd half of the 20th century, Flanders progressed economically from an agrarian society to an economy of tertiary sector services. This economic boom has accompanied Flemish demands in various fields, including the 1968 split of Leuven University (till then rather French-dominated or bilingual) into Dutch-speaking *Katholieke Universiteit Leuven* (in Leuven, Flanders) and French-speaking *Université Catholique de Louvain* (in Louvain-la-Neuve, Wallonia).

In 1980, Belgium became a federalised state with one national and several regional governments. The subnational entities were established according to two criteria. The first subdivision has resulted in the creation of mainly economic entities, called 'regions': the Flemish, the Walloon (including the German-speaking area in the East of Belgium) and Brussels Capital region. It is the second division, in 'communities', however, which will be most important for this article. The communities have been established according to the linguistic-cultural entities: the Flemish, the French and the German-speaking community¹. Subsequently, the Flemish community and region merged their executive and legislative forces into one Flemish government and parliament. The combination of both region and community status endows this government and parliament with a wide range of competences, including education, cultural life, environment, housing... Since such merge has not taken place in the French-speaking part, the Flemish government has more competences and seems therefore often more vigorous.

¹ Since Brussels Capital region is officially bilingual, the Flemish and French communities are responsible for their respective schools, cultural centres etc. in this area.

This subdivision in communities confirms to a large extent the territorial character of languages in Belgium. Nevertheless, there are some areas where the situation is less clear-cut, e.g. along the linguistic border and in the Brussels periphery. In order to solve this problem, municipalities with a considerable minority of Dutch-speakers, resp. French-speakers, have been given the status of 'facility municipalities'; this means that the minority has the right to receive some public services in their own language, e.g. education, library, public administration (Lamarcq – Rogge 1992)².

With its population of 5 973 000, Flanders represents 58% of the Belgian population and has more inhabitants than most of the 2004 EU accession states. The immigrant population being distributed differently according to the regions, Flanders proportionally has the lowest number of foreign population, whereas Brussels Capital district has the highest (Hambye – Lucchini 2005, Statbel 2005).

The position of Brussels as de facto European capital has introduced a new type of immigrants in Belgium: the so-called Eurocrats. In addition to the diplomatic body which can be found in any capital, Brussels hosts a high number of EU officials or people working for organisations linked to the EU or lobbying to the EU institutions. These are generally highly educated people, who already speak different languages prior to their arrival (although rarely Dutch). The children of this specific type of migrants generally attend the European Schools or equivalent initiatives, such as the Scandinavian school. These educational systems often pay a lot of attention to multilingual education, given the diverse background of their students. As a consequence, these immigrants' children usually don't enter the Belgian educational system.

The economic migration from the Maghreb countries, Turkey and, more recently, the Balkans has introduced a large group of generally lower educated immigrants, who therefore obtain less-paid jobs. These children do enter into the Belgian educational system.

For all immigrants it holds that, if they know one of the Belgian languages prior to arrival, this is French. Given the international position of French as compared to Dutch, learning French seems the better option to most foreigners, especially those living in Brussels.

Flanders is a region for which import and export are highly important. It is therefore not surprising that foreign language knowledge is an important asset for Flemish employees. Research on language requirements in job applications has emphasised the role of French in small to medium-sized enterprises (Clijsters 2002). According to a 1998 inquiry by VDAB (the Flemish job assistance service), 57.4 % of the respondents in reception and secretariat functions occasionally use French and 62.1% English. However, in terms of frequency of use the picture is the reverse: French accounts for 33.4%, English only for 15.4%. The third language in business life is German. The need to speak Italian and Spanish turned out to be negligible in most SMEs. In addition to the need for French in daily practice of SMEs, knowledge of French is required (and assessed by means of a language exam) for official functions, e.g. in the national administration or judicial system.

2. The Flemish educational system

Flemish children have compulsory training³ from the age of 6 till 18. Most children, however, start attending kindergarten by the age of approximately 3. Afterwards, they attend six primary school forms (age 6-12) and six secondary school forms (age 12-18). In secondary school, there is general secondary education (ASO), generally leading to university or other forms of higher education, technical secondary education (TSO) and secondary education in the arts (KSO), leading directly to a job or to some non-university forms of higher education. Finally, there is the vocational secondary education (BSO), which is rather skill-oriented.

² These facilities have been interpreted by the Dutch-speaking as a temporary measure, allowing a gradual integration of the French-speaking in Dutch-speaking municipalities. The French-speaking, however, consider these facilities to be acquired rights. This different interpretation gives regularly rise to discussions on the status of the facilities, as well as on the linguistic status of the municipalities involved.

³ This is officially defined as the duty to 'learn', not to 'attend school'. In practice, most children do attend school.

The highly territorial character of the Belgian official languages, as well as the communities' competence for education, partly explain the lack of fully bilingual schooling programmes in Belgium.

2.1. Globalisation from the inside: non-Dutch-speaking students in the Flemish educational system.

In some Dutch-speaking schools, an increasingly high percentage of students are of French-speaking origin. French-speaking parents might prefer Dutch-speaking education in order to enhance their children's plurilingualism or because the Dutch-speaking education system generally performs better in international comparisons. The presence of these French-speaking students favours the interpretation of extra French classes as a concession to non-Dutch-speaking students. This is part of the reason why some political and societal groups oppose to extending French training, especially in the first years of schooling (nursery school and primary education).

The French-speaking presence in Dutch-speaking schools is also a factor in the discussion concerning supplementary Dutch classes for non-native speakers. Whereas a fair share of the Flemish population can understand the need of supplementary Dutch classes for non-native speakers in general (especially if they are first generation immigrants or 'newcomers'), there is less comprehension for Belgian French-speakers. These are considered to have access to their 'own' educational system, provided for in their mother-tongue. Furthermore, there is overall a strong defensive attitude towards the Belgian French-speakers, given the past diglossic situation. A partial solution was found by endowing schools in the Brussels periphery or near the linguistic border with extra teaching time, in order to facilitate the integration of non-native speakers of Dutch. In view of the localisation of these schools, this policy is meant to have an upgrading effect on the integration in the Dutch-speaking school system of mainly French-speakers, representing the next generation of both the native and the migrant population, especially in the Brussels area.

The OETC (*Onderwijs in eigen taal en cultuur – Classes in own language and culture*) projects support the instruction of the own language and culture to children of foreign origin. This extra effort aims at making these pupils acquire Dutch more smoothly and more thoroughly. For a school to start such classes, however, the permission is needed of at least 2/3 of the migrant parents.

The 2002 decree "*Gelijke Onderwijskansen*" (equal chances in/for education) guarantees equal opportunities to all children, including non-Dutch-speaking children. Concretely, the decree stipulates that children have equal rights to subscription in schools, i.e. they can't be refused on the basis of their non-Dutch-speaking origin. The decree includes additional measures, e.g. extra language courses, to remedy possible language deficit problems.

Given the considerable Dutch language competence disparities among the pupils in the Flemish educational system, Education Secretary Vandembroucke (2005) has proposed to introduce Dutch language tests at various key moments. It is still to be determined whether these tests will be evaluative or orientating, binding or non-binding as regards to the study programme options that remain available to the student.

2.2. Growing up in a plurilingual world: foreign language education for Flemish youngsters

Flanders has since long fostered a positive discourse on plurilingualism in its inhabitants. Both the government and the Flemish citizens consider being plurilingual an asset in professional life. This plurilingualism has also been largely appreciated by foreigners.

Although the Flemish educational system reflects this positive attitude towards foreign languages, some languages appear to be more privileged than others. The main differentiating factors are the age at which pupils start to learn the language and the teaching time devoted to it.

In Flanders, the teaching of French generally starts in the 5th primary school form (at the age of 10-11); since 2004 this is obligatorily so. Moreover, extra French classes are taught from the 3rd form on in schools at the linguistic border or in so-called 'facility' municipalities.

The teaching of English is generally integrated in the programmes from the age of 13-14 on. German, on the other hand, is much less present, although in most schools it is being taught for one year to 15-16 year olds. Afterwards, only programme options with an important language component carry on with German. Recently, Spanish has been introduced in some secondary schools, especially in the last two years of the programme (2585 students took Spanish in the 5th and 6th form, while only 271 did so in the 3rd and 4th form) (Kenniscentrum Statistiek 2004). The European 'mother-tongue plus two'- goal (White Paper on education and training) is thus fulfilled by a considerable part of Flemish students. However, especially in rather technical and skill-oriented vocational training (TSO and BSO type, cf. note 3), students do not comply with the 'mother-tongue plus two'-goal.

The alternation of compulsory versus non-compulsory languages has its repercussions on the number of students learning a language.

Language	French	English	German	Spanish
Number of students in secondary education	390 259	294 001	83 135	2 856

Number of students in secondary education studying French, English, German or Spanish in the Flemish-speaking community. Data for the school year 2003-2004 (Kenniscentrum Statistiek 2004)

Foreign language promotion institutions, such as the *Consejería de Educación y Ciencia* of Spain indicate that, given the officially enshrined position of Belgian's official languages, it is particularly hard for other languages to enter 'the system' (De Cock 2003: 60).

The 'hierarchy' imposed by the official authorities might seem discordant with the spontaneous order for many Flemish youngsters. Indeed, given the predominance of English as a lingua franca in politics, media and cultural life (music, films), teenagers feel more acquainted with English than with French. Some consider English more useful in business settings. However, as signalled in part 1, French is still the most important foreign language for the majority of Flemish employees.

If we turn to non-compulsory education, however, we see a slightly different picture. About one sixth (15%) of the extra training taken by working population is dedicated to language. This confirms the importance of foreign language learning, even at a later age (Kenniscentrum Statistiek 2002).

The data collected by the Spanish education and culture service show a high interest for Spanish in evening classes or as an optional course in higher education. Approximately half of the students of Spanish in Belgium, learn the language in non-compulsory education (Consejería de Educación y Ciencia en Bélgica 2002). Furthermore, a considerable amount of students chooses Spanish as an optional course within their higher education.

Quite some adults take English or French classes in order to refresh or improve their school-based knowledge. Unfortunately, there are no data available for these languages.

The defensive attitude sometimes adopted vis-à-vis French, is also adopted vis-à-vis English in higher education. The Flemish educational decrees have established that English cannot be used as the main teaching language for a bachelor program (unless an equivalent Dutch-speaking bachelor is being organised as well by the same institution). Furthermore, English-speaking master programmes need special approval.

The anglicisation of higher education is sometimes compared with the earlier situation when Leuven university was bilingual and, before that, monolingually French. Extreme-right opponents even 'recycled' the slogan 'Leuven Vlaams' (Louvain Flemish) during a 2003 manifestation. Originally, this slogan was used during the 1966 manifestation searching for a more Flemish character of the University of Leuven, which resulted in its 1968 split. However, the overall setting has changed significantly since the first use of this slogan. Dutch has become firmly anchored in higher education and the economic welfare of Flanders has resulted in a stronger stance both in the national and international scene. Secondly, the position of French is different from that of English. English is not an official language in Belgium and it does not rely on a group of native speakers. Furthermore, it is the international character of English, especially in academia, which has given rise to higher education in English, rather than a strong national position, as was the case for French⁴. Finally, the higher education area itself has evolved, becoming increasingly international, at the level of both researcher and student mobility.

Recently, the Flemish education Secretary, Frank Vandenbroucke, has warned not to become overconfident concerning Flemish plurilingualism. On the contrary, caution should be paid to maintaining the level of plurilingualism or even increasing it. This cry for caution is a reaction to the publication of international reports, which revealed that Flanders, although teaching by average 2.6 foreign languages per student, is outstripped by Luxemburg (3.3) and Finland (2.8)⁵. Over the past few years, other European countries (and the French community) have considerably raised their foreign language learning initiative efforts, especially in primary education. Flanders' position regarding foreign language acquisition at a young age is probably about to change since French has officially become compulsory in primary education (by September 1st 2004) and since the possibilities for teaching another foreign language at this level are increasing.

Indeed, kindergarten or primary schooling including foreign language immersion have long been a taboo topic in Flanders. However, recent success of similar initiatives in the French community (the very vast majority chose Dutch as language of immersion) has reactivated the debate on foreign language immersion or initiation in Flanders as well. Various liberal parliament members, including the former Education Secretary, have asked to encourage multilingual training at all levels, in order to maintain a European top position in foreign language proficiency (Vanderpoorten et al. 2005).

Since September 2004, Flemish schools can organise language initiation (not immersion) from an earlier age on for French. They can also organise similar initiation for other languages, provided that there is also at least French language initiation. The goal of these projects is not primarily to actually teach the language but rather to make pupils acquainted with it. No extra means are given to schools offering such language initiation to their pupils. The schools organising these courses consider them to be an extra asset for their pupils' future.

2.3. Joining forces: cooperation with foreign institutions

In order to face the challenges of language education in a globalised world, Flanders seeks adhesion to some existing initiatives for language learning or mobility, especially at the European level.

The most obvious one is the Erasmus-Socrates student exchange framework of the European Union. Different subprogrammes create exchange opportunities at all schooling levels. An additional Belgian initiative is the *Prins Filipsfonds*⁶, which supports exchange programmes between the three Belgian communities, thus encouraging the interaction among them. The very existence of such an exchange programme illustrates to which extent education has become a federalised competence in Belgium.

In addition to the exchange frameworks, several foreign language institutions offer support to Flemish foreign language teachers, by means of teacher training or by making course materials available.

⁴ Nevertheless, one should also acknowledge that French enjoyed, in addition to its strong national social position, international prestige in academic and diplomatic circles.

⁵ This type of data only evaluates the number of languages taught/learned at each level. It does not, however, evaluate the proficiency achieved in these languages.

⁶ Prins Filip is the Belgian crown prince. The royal family represents the national unity and frequently emphasises the richness of Belgium's linguistic and cultural diversity. It is therefore not surprising that an initiative favouring exchange between the different subnational entities is patronised by a member of the royal family.

For the organisation of the 2005 *European Day of Languages* (September 26th), a protocol was signed including cooperation with foreign language promotion institutes such as the *British Council*, the *Goethe Institut*, the cultural service of the French embassy, as well as teacher associations of French, English and German and *Roeland*, a non-profit organisation for creative language teaching and learning (Vlaamse Gemeenschap 2005). This protocol is intended to be a starting point for reflection with the three language communities on issues such as the *Common European Framework of Reference* (proposed by the *Council of Europe*), the language portfolio or exchange programmes for native speaker teachers.

Furthermore, there are some agreements with specific countries, i.a. Morocco. This includes on the one hand facilities for the Moroccan children (or children of Moroccan origin) in Belgium and on the other hand, exchange of 'good practices' in terms of, for instance, ICT in the classroom. The OETC (*Onderwijs in eigen taal en cultuur – Classes in own language and culture*) was one of the topics discussed. To carry out this programme, as well as similar initiatives for other languages, the government prefers Belgian teachers of foreign origin, rather than foreign teachers. Teachers who have been living in Belgium for a long time are considered to have better assets to guide the students, given their acquaintance with Belgian society, culture and the educational system.

3. Conclusion

Flanders' attitude towards language learning may seem complex to the outside world. Because of political and geo-economic reasons, Flanders is rather protective about its mother-tongue, Dutch, while at the same time it has a solid tradition in foreign language learning. It is important to take both aspects into account for a correct understanding of Flanders' attitude.

In order to maintain high foreign language learning standards, Flanders is gradually adapting its educational system. This includes the cooperation with foreign institutions and the earlier start of foreign language teaching.

As a multicultural region, situated in the centre of Europe, Flanders has to find adequate ways to help students of foreign origin to live in a Dutch-speaking society, while respecting their background and specific language needs.

The foreign language education of Flemish youngsters, on the other hand, evolves in response to the European expectations and possibilities. It does so within the framework of the Belgian language legislation and against the background of a changing relationship with the French community as well as with the international community.

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