

# **Aula Magna**

## **Language use and linguistic competence in the Brussels Capital Region**

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in the light of the material and reflections presented on 29 November 2005 by  
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### **Summary**

#### **1. What does it mean to belong to a language group?**

It can mean very different things, from choosing one of two languages for one's identity card to having one among several hundreds of languages present in Brussels as one of one's native languages

#### **2. What do we know about the language situation in Brussels?**

Essentially what can be inferred from the fairly large sample used in Rudi Janssens's study (1999) and from the much smaller sample used for the latest Eurobarometer on languages (2005)

#### **3. What are the native languages of the Brussels population ?**

The pure native French speakers should now be well below 50%, and the pure native Dutch speakers well below 10%.

#### **4. Has the "verfransing" stopped?**

It has not, but is accompanied by a "vernederlandsing" through the school system.

#### **5. Are immigrants being linguistically assimilated ?**

Yes, but far from fully and less deeply for Brusselers of Turkish than of Moroccan origin, for example.

#### **6. How much does the periphery differ from Brussels ?**

In communes with facilities, by having more pure francophone natives than in Brussels; in communes without facilities, by having far more pure Dutch natives than in Brussels; in both sets of communes, by having far less natives of a language other than French and Dutch.

#### **7. Is French still the lingua franca ?**

Definitely. Good to very good competence in French is shared by over 95% of the population, compared to 31% for Dutch and 36% for English, which has in this sense become Brussels's second language.

#### **8. How much does Brussels differ from the rest of the country ?**

The reality does not correspond at all to the official status of bilingual Brussels versus unilingual Flanders and Wallonia: Brussels is less bilingual (NL/FR) than Brabant wallon and than every Flemish province.

#### **9. Five conclusions**

1. Census please! 2. Who is a "francophone"? 3. Verfransing-vernederlandsing-verengelsing. 4. Neo-zinnekes. 5. From handicap to asset?

## **1. What does it mean to belong to a language group?**

In a multilingual environment, language statistics are often very tricky. In particular, should belonging to a particular language group be defined as

- having that language as one's "mother tongue" (i.e. having been initially brought up in that language by at least one of one's parents);
- usually speaking that language with one's parents now;
- usually speaking that language at home in one's present household;
- speaking that language in most of the conversations one is currently taking part in;
- having that language as one's best language;
- claiming to be able to speak that language;
- claiming to be able to read that language;
- claiming the ethnic/national identity associated with that language;
- possessing at birth the nationality associated with that language;
- opting for an identity card in that language;
- getting married, born or buried in that language;
- voting for a party belonging to that language group at the regional elections ?

Obviously, depending on the definition chosen, language statistics in Brussels can vary enormously. With all definitions except the last two, Brussels has far more than two language groups. And with some of these definitions, the total of the other language groups is even slowly approaching the majority of the population.

## **2. What do we know about the language situation in Brussels?**

The most thorough study of the linguistic situation in the Brussels Region has been conducted by Rudi Janssens (2001) on the basis of data collected in 1999. It has been subsequently supplemented by a study based on data collected in 2001 in nine communes of the periphery of Brussels, including the six communes with facilities (Janssens 2002).

The survey used a representative sample of adult members of the population officially domiciled in the Brussels region, stratified so as to mirror the distribution between genders, ages and communes. It consisted in face-to-face interviews of 30 minutes conducted in French, Dutch, Arabic, Turkish or English. In case the person selected was unavailable, there were three reserve addresses, and if none worked, neighbours to the right-hand side were selected, if possible with similar demographic characteristics.

In this light, one must note or conjecture the following biases.

1. The officially registered foreigners are underrepresented in the sample (20.9 % instead of the 1999 official figure 24.8 %).
2. The undocumented migrants and other unregistered residents are not taken into account (this includes Belgians, e.g. students domiciled at their parents' outside Brussels, but mainly non-Belgians, EU and non-EU).

3. Sufficient fluency in at least one of the five languages in which the questionnaire was available was a condition for inclusion in the sample, and fluency in French or Dutch is bound to have increased the probability of being included, especially as a last-resort substitute.

For these three reasons, one can safely conjecture that the sample over-represents French and Dutch native speakers relative to natives of other languages among the 1999 adult residents. Owing to the higher rate of birth in households of recent foreign origin, this overrepresentation is even greater with respect to the 1999 total population, with minors included. And owing to both this higher birth rate and to a persistent net inflow from abroad, this overrepresentation can be estimated to be greater still with respect to the 2006 population. Hence it seems reasonable to suppose that all estimates for Dutch and French natives must be seen as upper limits, to be shrunk by at least 10% to get a fair guess of present reality.

### 3. What are the native languages of the Brussels population ?

Bearing these caveats in mind, Table 1 gives a useful general image of the native language situation in the Brussels Region in 1999 on the basis of answers to the question: "Which language or languages do or did you speak in conversations with your mother/ with your father?" (Janssens 2000: 289).

**Table 1. Language spoken with parents (1999)**

Native language	Belgians	non-Belgians	Total
FR	62.8	9.2	51.5
NL	10.9	2.9	9.3
FR+NL	12.2	0.4	10.1
FRorNL+other	7.4	15.9	9.1
other	6.2	71.7	19.8
	1995	526	2521
Sample size	(79.1%)	(20.9%)	(100%)

Source: Janssens (2001: 34)

Thus, slightly over half the population had French only as its "mother tongue", and less than 10% Dutch only. Because of the biases mentioned, it would be surprising if today the pure native francophones exceeded 45% and the pure native Dutch speakers 8%. About 70%, 20% and 30% had French, Dutch and another language, respectively as at least one of their native languages.

#### 4. Has the “verfransing” stopped?

One major conjecture (contemplated with glee by some, with horror by others) is that Brussels has worked as a machine for the Frenchification of Flemings. How true is this?

**Table 2. Language spoken with partner and children (1999)**

	FR natives: Partner’s native language	FR natives: Language used with partner	FR natives: Language used with children	NL natives: Partner’s native language	NL natives: Language used with children
FR	55.5	95.6	89.5	40.3	30.5
NL	12.5	0.6	0	42.9	32.5
FR + NL	6.1	1.6	6.3	8.4	35.7
FR + other	3.4	1.6	4.2	0	1.3
Other	22.5	0.6	0	8.4	0

Janssens 2001: 48-49, 75-77.

The contrast between French and Dutch unilingual natives is striking. Nearly 20% of the unilingual French natives have a Dutch native partner (unilingual or bilingual), 100% of the total speak (at least partly) French with their children, and 6% (partly) Dutch. By contrast, nearly 50% of the unilingual Dutch natives have a French native partner (unilingual or bilingual), 68% of the total speaks (at least partly) Dutch with their children, and 66% (at least partly) French. The flow is overwhelmingly in one direction, but not totally: some unilingual French natives (about 10 % of the total) do not speak exclusively French with their children. In this very modest sense, French is not (or no longer) an “absorbing state” (one in which a lineage remains stuck, once it has hit it upon it). But whereas whereas nearly one third of the Dutch natives abandon Dutch altogether with their children, 100% of the French natives preserve French.

It is worth stressing that the phenomena reflected in this table may be very old: A seventy-year old brought up in Dutch by both his parents and speaking French with his children now may have shifted to French when he started attending a French-medium school before World War II. To catch the dynamics, age differentiation is useful. Table 3 refers to the language spoken with the children in mixed couples (NL/FR) by respondents aged over 65 and under 40, respectively. There is a dramatic shift away from unilingual French education to bilingual and even to unilingual Dutch education. But the asymmetry remains substantial.

**Table 3. Language spoken at home in mixed FR-NL marriages (1999)**

Age	FR	FR+NL	NL
65+	76.2	19.0	4.8
-40	57.1	35.7	7.1

Source: Janssens (slides)

The main change, however, concerns school choice rather than home language (see Table 4). As shown in the following table, the tendency for unilingual Dutch natives to send their children born in Brussels to a French-medium school, which affected 2/3 of those now over 65 has now been completely squeezed out.

**Table 4. Language of schooling among unilingual Dutch natives born in Brussels (1999)**

Age	NL school	FR school
26-	100	0
26-40	81.8	18.2
41-65	53.1	46.9
65+	36.8	57.9

Source: Janssens (slides)

This goes hand in hand with a growing number of non-Dutch natives choosing to send their children to Dutch-medium schools, as shown in Table 5. Children from unilingual Dutch-speaking families are a minority at all levels in the Flemish community schools of the Brussels Region. They are hardly more than 10% at kindergarten level. Pupils with at least one Dutch-native parent are a majority at secondary level, but only because many pupils come from outside Brussels

**Table 5. Home language of pupils in Brussels's Flemish schools (2005)**

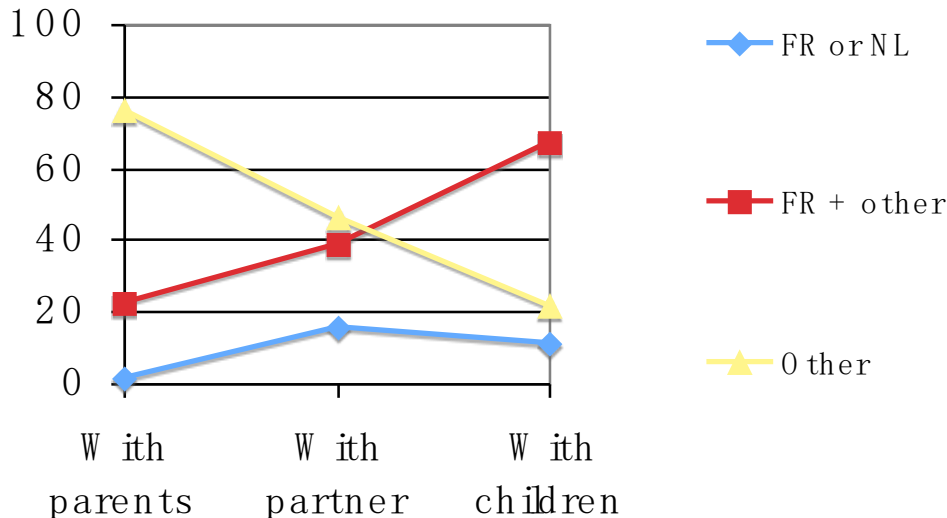
Home language	Kindergarten	Primary	Secondary
NL	11.0	15.5	38.9
NL+FR	19.8	23.3	27.6
FR	34.6	30.9	16.8
other	34.6	30.3	16.7

Source: Janssens (slides)

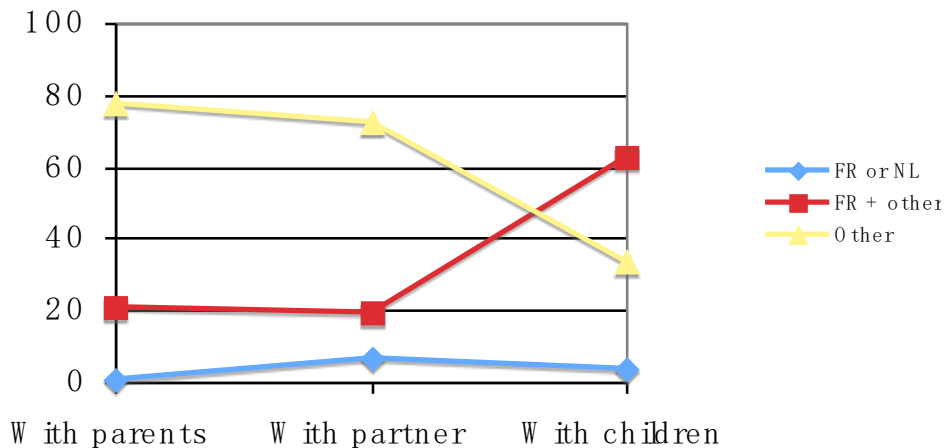
## 5. Are immigrants being linguistically assimilated ?

Do immigrants tend to retain from generation to generation the language of their country of origin or do they switch to one or both of our national languages? The situation turns out to be quite different for the two main immigrant communities in Brussels, respectively from Morocco and from Turkey.

**Graph 1. Respondents of Moroccan origin (2001)**



**Graph 2. Respondents of Turkish origin (1999)**



Source: Janssens (table on slides)

One striking fact in both cases is that a full shift to French (or Dutch) for communication with the children is confined to a small minority (especially for Turkish respondents). On the other hand, the exclusive use of the native language with the partner and with the children is over 50% more frequent among respondents of Turkish origin than among respondents of Moroccan origin : 72% versus 46% for partners, 33% versus 21% for children. The greater linguistic diversity of Moroccans (most of them are Berberophones) and the more frequent "import" of Turkish brides may account for the difference.

## 6. How much does the periphery differ from Brussels ?

Is the linguistic situation very different in Brussels's immediate Flemish periphery from what it is in the Brussels Region itself? A survey was conducted in 2001, using the same sort of sampling and of questions as in Brussels, both in the six communes with "linguistic facilities" for the francophones (Drogenbos, Kraainem, Linkebeek, St Genesius Rode, Wemmel and Wezembek-Oppeem) and in three similar communes without facilities (Grimbergen, St Pieters Leeuw, Tervuren).

**Table 6. Native language of residents in Brussels's periphery (2001)**

Native language	Brussels	With facilities	Without facilities
FR	51.5	52.2	24.1
NL	9.3	22.3	51.1
FR+NL	10.1	12.0	11.1
FRorNL+other	9.1	5.8	2.6
other	19.8	7.7	10.6
	2521	656	378

Source: Janssens (2002: 297)

The table above shows

- that the number of "pure French natives" (i.e. people who spoke French with both their parents) is larger in the communes with facilities than in Brussels itself;
- that the main difference between Brussels and its immediate periphery is that the former has nearly 30% of people with a foreign native language and the latter only around 13% (in both sets of communes);
- that there is a significant difference between communes with and without facilities: more than twice as many "pure French natives" as "pure Dutch natives" in the former, the opposite in the latter.

Why is there such a big difference between the communes with and without facilities? This may be due to unequal extents to a difference in the initial situation (which led to the concession of facilities to some of the communes and not to the

others) and to migration patterns (selection settlement in the light of the language regime). Table 7 provides some support to the latter conjecture.

**Table 7. Place of birth of residents of Brussels’s periphery (2001)**

Place of birth	Communes with facilities	Communes without facilities
Commune	14.7	23.3
Flanders	18.7	30.2
Brussels	42.2	32.0
Wallonia	11.4	3.4
Abroad	13.2	11.1

Source: Janssens (2002: 293)

The table shows that over 2/3 of the respondents in the communes with facilities were born in Brussels, Wallonia or abroad, that birth in another Flemish commune is more than 50% more frequent in a commune without facilities, and that birth in a Walloon commune is more than three times more frequent in a commune with facilities. The evidence is not conclusive, however, as some of the immigration occurred before the introduction of the facilities (in 1963) and as the place of birth may often refer to the address of an hospital rather than to the first domicile of the person.

## **7. Is French still the lingua franca ?**

In most communication taking place within the Brussels Region between people who do not have the same native language, French operates as the lingua franca. Table 8 shows that, although only 51% of the Brussels population consisted of pure French natives, over 95% of the Brussels population speaks good to excellent French, far above competence in any other language. Answers to more detailed questions reveal that French is used overwhelmingly in streets and shops (Janssens 2001: 179-82)

Table 8 also shows that competence in English has caught up with competence in Dutch, and even most probably overtaken it significantly, given the sample bias and the trend mentioned above. This conjecture is confirmed by the Eurobarometer 2006 data set (survey conducted in 2005), as shown in Table 9. The move of Dutch into third position is partly due to the Dutch native’s good level of English (57.1% versus 36.8% for the Brussels francophones according to the Eurobarometer data), but above all to the fact that all categories of foreigners or people of foreign origin (with the obvious exception of the Dutch) have a significantly higher average level of competence in English than in Dutch (see Table 10).



**Table 8. Competence in the most widespread languages (1999)**

Language	Good to excellent knowledge
French	95.6
Dutch	33.3
English	33.3
German	21.1
Spanish	13.2
Arabic	11.6
Italian	10.6
Turkish	3.6

Source: Janssens (2001: 39).

**Table 9. Good or very good knowledge in main languages (2005)**

Language	Brussels	Flanders	Wallonia
French	96	53.5	100
Dutch	31	98.5	15.5
English	36	52	20
German	12	18.5	2

Source: Van Parys & Wauters (2006: Table 3), using the data set of Eurobarometer 2006.

Table 10 sheds light on the situation from a different angle. According to these data, it is obvious enough that if you need to address the Brussels population with one language only, you should choose French: you reach nearly 96% of the population. If you can add a second language, which should you choose? Dutch will give you access an additional half percent, English to slightly more than an additional one percent. In either case, the gain will be marginal, but it is more than double if you choose English rather than Dutch. And this gap is increasing, as the number of Dutch speakers who know well neither French nor English tends toward zero, while the number of Brusselers who know good English but little French keeps increasing. For purposes of communication with the residents of Brussels (as distinct from those who work in Brussels), the knowledge of Dutch is increasingly redundant — not mainly because Flemings tend to choose to live outside the Region, but because they are so good at languages —, while the use of English is decreasingly redundant. Some shops have obviously already realized this (see Illustration 1).

Combining the figures of Table 10 in a different way also enables to perceive the strong incentive and opportunity to learn French if you settle in Brussels. If you know only Dutch, you can speak with 33.3 % of the Brussels population. Adding French will enable to talk to another 62.8 %. Adding English instead will enable you

to talk to only another 16.7%. If you know only English, you can also speak with 33.3 % of the Brussels population. Adding French enables you to talk to another 63.4 %. Adding Dutch instead will enable you to talk to only another 16.7%

**Table 10. Overlap between linguistic competences: good to excellent knowledge of English and Dutch (1999)**

**1. Among those who have good to excellent knowledge of French (95.6%)**

	Dutch Yes	Dutch No
English Yes	16.4	15.8
English No	16.4	47.0

**2. Among those who do not have good to excellent knowledge of French (4.4%)**

	Dutch Yes	Dutch No
English Yes	0.2	0.9
English No	0.3	3.0

Source: Janssens 2001: 38.

**Illustration 1: Brussels’s new functional bilingualism**



More fine-grained data (Table 11) show that even among pure Dutch natives, the extent of good to excellent knowledge is practically the same for French and for Dutch. French is by far the best known among the four main languages among all other main categories except the North Europeans, where English comes on top. However, as shown by Table 12, the gap between French and English is closing. Among immigrants who came after 1980, competence in English is substantially better than for their immigrant group as a whole in the case of Moroccans and Turks as well as for South and North Europeans, whereas competence in both French and Dutch is significantly worse for all of them (apart from Dutch for the Turks).

**Table 11. Good to excellent knowledge of the three main languages among the Brussels population (1999)**

Language group	NL	FR	EN
Native FR	25.7	100	33.4
Native NL	96.6	95.7	41.2
Native NL+FR	74.0	99.6	29.1
Moroccan	8.5	82.6	12.9
Turkish	4.5	71.2	6.9
South European	9.3	97.3	30.3
North European	19.5	80.5	89.7
Total	33.3	95.6	33.3

Source: Janssens (2001: 46, 73, 116)

**Table 12. Good to excellent knowledge of the three main languages respondents who immigrated after 1980 (1999)**

Language group	NL	FR	EN
Moroccan	8.0	77.0	17.2
Turkish	5.7	57.1	11.4
South European	2.4	92.7	56.1
North European	8.3	70.8	95.9

Source: Janssens (2001: 46, 73, 116)

Is the situation any different in the immediate periphery? To some extent, as shown in Table 13. Relative to Brussels, the average knowledge of all three languages is better, especially for Dutch, which is there still clearly ahead of English.

**Table 13. Good to excellent knowledge of the three main languages in the six communes with facilities (2001)**

Language group	NL	FR	EN
Native FR	26.5	100	27.6
Native NL	99.3	91.7	40.0
Native NL+FR	76.9	100	37.2
Native FR+other	21.0	100	63.1
Other	12.0	80.0	54.0
Total	47.3	96.6	35.7

Source: Janssens (2002: 299-300)

## **8. How much does Brussels differ from the rest of the country ?**

Finally, it may be illuminating to compare the linguistic situation in Brussels to the situation in the rest of the country. To appreciate it, it is important to first realize to what extent the Brussels Region differs from all ten provinces in terms of its "ethnic" composition. The distances to the sizes of the triangle in Graph 3 represents estimates the percentages of the population in the Brussels Region, in the other two Regions and in the 10 provinces that are, respectively, of Belgian origin, of EU non-Belgian origin and of non-EU origin. These estimates (Table 14), proposed by Jan Hertogen, are based on the number of nationals of each country, the number of naturalizations for each nationality and the birth rates among the naturalized. Being to the left or to the right of the vertical line reflects the fact that people of foreign origin are predominantly from the EU or from outside the EU. Being above or below the horizontal line reflect the fact that people of Belgian origin are the majority or the minority. The one striking fact that emerges from this diagram is of course that Brussels is completely different from the rest of the country: the least "Belgian" province (Hainaut) has 20 % of people of foreign origin. The Brussels Region has over 56%, and the rate is increasing every year.

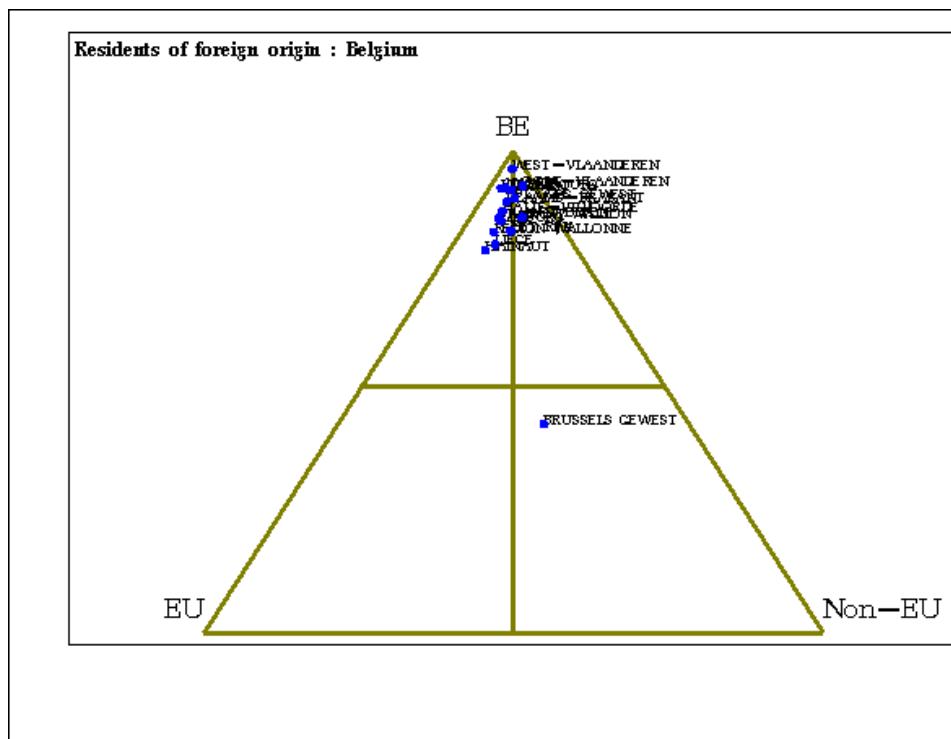
Joined to the low rate of Dutch learning by French natives even in Brussels (36.8%, compared to 15.5% in Wallonia, according to the 2005 Eurobarometer data used by Van Parys & Wauters 2006), this "ethnic" make up of the Brussels population goes a long way towards explaining the huge discrepancy between what one might have expected from the official linguistic status of the three Regions, namely Flanders unilingual Dutch, Wallonia unilingual French, and Brussels bilingual. Brussels turns out to be more remote from national bilingualism than Brabant wallon and than every Flemish province, especially Vlaams Brabant, the most bilingual (NL/FR) part of the country (see Table 15 and Graph 4).

**Table 14. Percentages of people of Belgian, EU and non-EU origin in Belgium's provinces (2006 estimate)**

Region/Province	BE	EU	Non-EU
<b>Vlaanderen</b>	<b>90.4</b>	<b>4.5</b>	<b>5.1</b>
Antwerpen	86.5	5.3	8.2
Vlaams Brabant	89.7	6.2	4.1
West Vlaanderen	96.5	1.9	1.6
Oost Vlaanderen	93.0	1.9	5.1
Limburg	85.8	9.1	5.1
<b>Wallonie</b>	<b>83.8</b>	<b>11.4</b>	<b>5.2</b>
Brabant wallon	86.3	9.2	4.5
Hainaut	79.6	14.7	5.7
Liège	80.8	12.5	6.7
Luxembourg	92.5	5.7	1.8
Namur	92.6	4.9	2.5
<b>Brussels</b>	<b>43.6</b>	<b>23.3</b>	<b>33.1</b>
<b>Belgium</b>	<b>83.6</b>	<b>8.6</b>	<b>7.8</b>

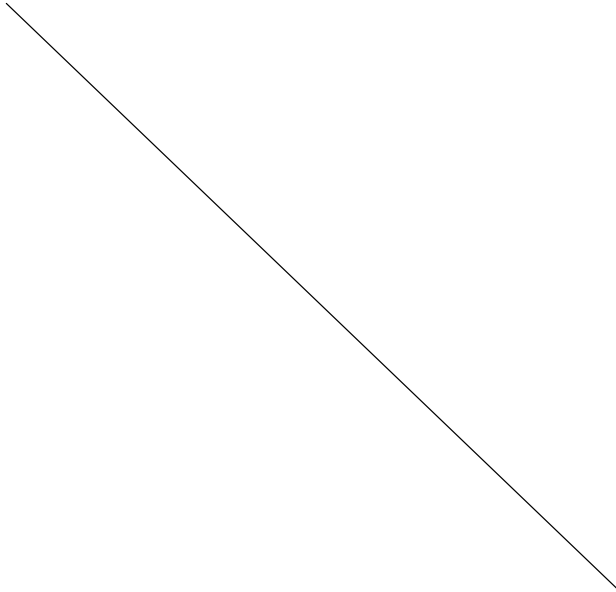
Source of the estimates: Jan Hertogen, <http://www.npdata.be/Data/Vreemdelingen/>

**Graph 3. Percentages of people of foreign origin in Belgium's provinces (2006 estimate)**



Source of the estimates: <http://www.npdata.be/Data/Vreemdelingen/>

**Graph 4. Percentages of people with very good or good knowledge of Dutch versus French in the ten provinces (2005)**



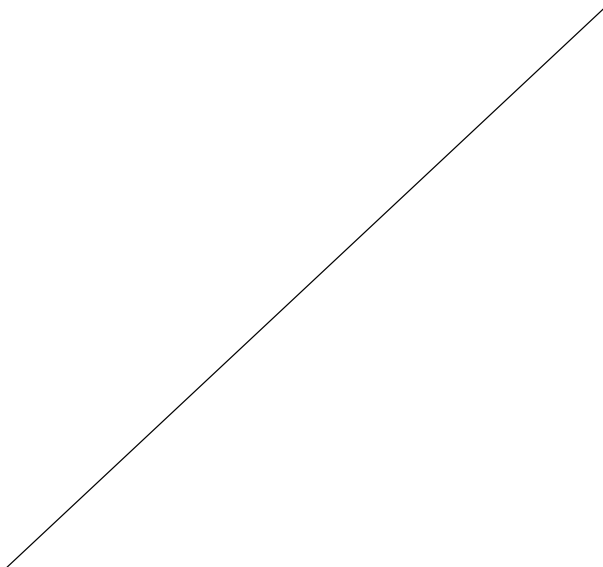
In another respect, Brussels follows the same pattern as most of the other provinces, namely that English has now become better known than the second national language (see Table 15, Graph 5). There are three exceptions: West Vlaanderen, where French is not just the other national language, but perhaps more importantly the language of the big neighbouring nation; and again both Brabant provinces, not because they are poorer in English — on the contrary —, but because they are far above every other province in their respective regions as regards competence in the second national language. One interpretation is straightforward: the continuing flow of non-Belgians into the capital had led to (and partly been pulled by) the exodus of its Belgian bilinguals to its periphery.

**Table 15. Percentages of people with very good or good knowledge of Dutch, French, English and German in the three Regions (2005)**

<b>Region/Province</b>	<b>NL</b>	<b>FR</b>	<b>EN</b>	<b>DE</b>
<b>Vlaanderen</b>	<b>98.7</b>	<b>52.5</b>	<b>52</b>	<b>18.5</b>
Antwerpen	99.4	52.7	63.8	
Vlaams Brabant	94.6	66.2	52.7	
West Vlaanderen	99.2	55.0	44	
Oost Vlaanderen	100	50.4	50.4	
Limburg	98.9	34.4	44.8	
<b>Wallonie</b>	<b>15.5</b>	<b>100</b>	<b>20</b>	<b>2</b>
Brabant wallon	36.4	100	31.8	
Hainaut	16.8	100	19.3	
Liège	16.3	100	20	
Luxembourg	21.7	100	26	
Namur	6.6	100	13.3	
<b>Brussels</b>	<b>31</b>	<b>96</b>	<b>36</b>	<b>12</b>

Source: Van Parys & Wauters (2006: Table 3), using the data set of Eurobarometer 2006.

**Graph 5. Percentages of people with very good or good knowledge of the other national language versus English in the ten provinces (2005)**



## 9. Five conclusions

**1. Census please!** It turns out that, thanks to the work of the VUB's Centre for the Interdisciplinary study of Brussels and to the Eurobarometer studies we know quite a lot about the language situation in and around Brussels. We would like to know more, in more detail and with more certainty, if only to gain a better understanding of the "ethnic" dynamics so crucial for Brussels, not detectable through citizenship for most of the residents of non-EU origin. It is therefore about time that we reintroduce a linguistic component in the official census (or whatever is left of it). We do not need the question "What is the language you use most?", which was introduced in the 1910 census, was given a key role in the fixation of the language border by the law of June 1932, led to the delay (until 1954) of the publication of that aspect of the 1947 census, to the boycott of the 1960 census and eventually to the scrapping of the linguistic component of all subsequent censuses (Lamarcq & Rogge 1996: 211-15). What we need, as in the VUB studies and in the Eurobarometer, is information about native language(s), competence levels, etc., for the sake of gaining insights in processes at work, not of determining territorial borders on the basis of tribal ascription. We should now be adult enough to allow ourselves to know.

**2. Who is a "francophone"?** Brussels's linguistic situation is complex and moving fast. One implication of its complexity is that one must be very cautious when asserting "Sur dix Bruxellois, neuf sont francophones" (Bouillon 2005, based on the proportion of official acts registered in French or Dutch in 2002), and generally when ascribing people to a particular linguistic group. Over 96% of the people living in Brussels say they speak French well or very well, but an estimated 45% have French and only French as their native language. So, in one sense practically the whole of the Brussels population is "francophone". In another, less than half. The cause of this discrepancy lies in the ever more diverse "ethnic" make up of the Brussels population, with an estimated 56% of recent foreign origin, and with a high rate of retention of the immigrant language. In this light, one should not be surprised if less than a third of the Brussels population is bilingual French/Dutch, proportionally less than in Brabant wallon, and far less than in Vlaams Brabant, which alone houses well over twice as many bilinguals as the whole of the Brussels Region

**3. Verfransing-vernerderlandsing-verengelsing.** The situation is not only complex, but also moving quite fast. The incentive and opportunity to learn French remains strongest for anyone moving into Brussels and wishing to communicate with its residents. One spectacular development is the change in the linguistic background of pupils in Brussels Flemish schools. From ghetto schools for a dwindling and besieged minority, these have been turned into a large network of effective immersion schools for non-Dutch natives. Another fast development, in Brussels as elsewhere in Europe, is the rise of competence in English. In terms of native languages, Anglophones are a negligible minority of the Brussels population. But in terms of competence, it has now comfortably overtaken Dutch as the second language of Brussels. Moreover, looking at the various categories of immigrants shows that the knowledge of English among those more recently arrived is



considerably higher than among those arrived earlier, and their knowledge of French significantly lower.

**4. Neo-zinnekes.** Two final comments, both pointing to the future. First, all this should make it clear enough that it has become altogether absurd to think of the Brussels population as consisting in the conjunction of two mutually exclusive and collectively exhaustive linguistic communities. But it does not follow that it has become any more meaningful to think of Brussels as a community of zinnekes in the sense of bilingual (FR/NL) people. This is definitely not the direction in which we are moving. More than ever, and more diversely than ever, Brussels, if it can be a community at all, is, will be and must be a community of zinnekes, reinterpreted as people with multiple identities, rather than just a single or double tribal one. These multiple identities, they must be able to view and experience as being not only fully compatible with, but also required by, their being true Brusselers.

**5. From handicap to asset?** Secondly, this big constantly refuelled linguistic mess is not always easy to live with, even less easy to manage. But there should be ways of turning this linguistic wealth, more than we do now, into an asset, rather than just being a problem. This will require experimentation and re-organization in our school systems that will make use of the linguistic diversity at hand, without damaging competence in the pupils' native languages and without increasing the huge inequalities that already exist. Only an intelligent cooperation between the schools of the Vlaamse Gemeenschap, of the Communauté française and of the European Schools network can hope to achieve this. Once a side deal at the 2000 Nice Summit had de facto turned Brussels into the official capital of Europe, Romano Prodi and Guy Verhofstadt allowed themselves to organize a brain storming on what the "Capital of Europe" should look like. Among the very few concrete proposals it came up with was that of an Institute for Multilingualism. Less than one more research centre, we need intelligent large-scale experimentation that makes the best use of an exceptional concentration of linguistic competence to the benefit of all the children who grow up in Brussels and of many more.

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