

Is Belgium willing to adopt a new language?

Introduction:

In December 2018, the Prime Minister of Belgium Charles Michel resigned, a few days after his coalition government collapsed. Since then, Mr Michel remains as head of the caretaker government until the next Belgian election taking place in May 2019. Caretaker government has become part of the Belgian politics in recent years, especially in 2010 when no federal government was formed for more than 530 days after the general election, one of the worst political crises in the modern time. The collapse of the recent Belgian government headed by a Wallonian Prime Minister was triggered by the withdrawal of the Flemish N-VA party over issues surrounding the UN migration pact. However, the actual cause of the recent collapse runs much deeper in Belgium's day to day life and even before the creation the Belgian state. Several solutions have been proposed and implemented to mitigate conflicts between the two main (linguistic) communities in Belgium: Dutch-speaking Flanders and French-speaking Wallonia. Some proposals were even raised before Belgium was born. Although those ideas are not necessarily related to the future linguistic struggles, if implemented, the political crisis taking place in Belgium now could have been avoided.

The political crisis might easily turn into severe financial crisis if things cannot be resolved. The potential split of Belgium into different new countries might be the challenge not just for politicians but also businesses operating in Belgium since the whole Belgian market becomes much more fragmented with so many uncertainties.

This paper will contemplate solutions that have been proposed and some implemented in order to mitigate the confrontation between the two linguistic communities as well as to protect the unity of Belgium.

1. A brief history of Belgium and proposed solutions

1.1 Before the Belgian revolution in 1830

After the end of the Napoleonic War, the United Kingdom of the Netherlands was created as a result of the Congress of Vienna 1814-15. The new kingdom at the end of the French revolution was a collection of several territories mostly covering now the Netherlands (the northern part), Belgium (the southern part) and Luxembourg. At the beginning, even though the Dutch-speaking population dominated the southern part demographically, French language was preferred by the minority elite from both Dutch and French speaking parts of the now Belgium. While Protestant is the main religion in the northern part, Roman Catholics dominates day-to-day life in the south.

At the beginning of the creation of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands, around 75% of the population spoke Dutch. In order to unite the whole kingdom, the Dutch king William I of the House of Orange wanted to centralise the use of language and to promote Dutch as the sole national language. In 1823, William I set out his decrees (de Taalbesluiten) to realise his ambition. However, his ambition did not have any "long lasting effect" (Donaldson, 1983) and faced strong resistance from the francophone population and elites. Seven years later, the Belgian revolution broke out that led to the creation of the Belgian state in which the language decrees implemented by William I is thought to play its part.

Promoting a common national language is not something new at that time. Moore (2014) and Gadet and Ludwig (2014) remind us that this is one of the main policies implemented during the French revolutionary period. Moore (2014) sees the 1794 decree as “[the decree] must rank as an early landmark in the history of language policy and planning in Europe”. Abbé Henri Grégoire’s report (quoted by Moore) “On the necessity and means to annihilate the patois and to universalize the use of the French language” (Rapport sur la Nécessité et les Moyens d’anéantir les Patois et d’universaliser l’Usage de la Langue française) which was presented on the same day as the 1794 decree:

Before the Revolution, France was divided into provinces that, for the most part, had different customs and different dialects. This disparity was, in the hands of despots, one more means to keep them under their thumb. The Revolution has united you around the homeland; there are no more provinces. Why then do thirty dialects that recall the names of those provinces still establish between you deadly divisions?

For authors of the 1794 decree including Abbé Henri Grégoire, Moore said, “did not see language diversity as an asset for France”. If the same argument can be borrowed for the case of William I’s 1823 decrees, one can think of this as a founding solution, even though in 1823, Belgium did not exist.

1.2 After the Belgian revolution in 1830

The Belgian revolution which broke out in 1830 risks the collapse of the Congress of Vienna 1814-15. Lingelbach (1933) writes:

“The action of the Belgians not only disturbed the status quo, but threatened to destroy the whole bulwark for security and peace the powers had built up with so much care ... Belgium in revolt might well invite the [French July] revolutionary elements in France to attempt to rectify the north-eastern frontier”.

The creation of the United Kingdom of the Netherlands was to prevent the expansion of France to the north-east of Europe, especially after the aftermaths of the French revolution. However, France did see the opportunity of the Belgian revolution for its own territorial expansion ambition. The partition plan of Belgium (based on the linguistic border) proposed by Talleyrand (a representative of France) was rejected (Lingelbach, 1933). However, according to Helmreich (1976), quoted in Partem (1983), not just France but also Holland and Prussia also wanted to partition Belgium. In here, one might expect that if Talleyrand’s proposal would have been implemented, the confrontation between the Flemish and Wallonian communities could have been avoided. This, therefore, could be considered as another early solutions.

1.3 The evolution of language policy after the Belgian state was created

It was not until 1939 when the Netherlands finally recognised the independence of Belgium even though Belgium’s independence and neutrality have been guaranteed by all five great powers. Despite the fact that William I had to abandon his language decrees due to the huge resentment from the French-speaking population in the southern part, the newly established

Belgian state only recognised French as its sole language and was used at all levels of the administrative levels, given that the majority of the population of the newly created nation spoke Dutch and more accurately, they spoke several [Germanic] dialects (Popelier & Cantillon 2013). At least there are three reasons that make French language the dominant one at the early years of the establishment of the Belgian state. Culturally and symbolically speaking, the newly independent Belgium needed to differentiate itself from the Dutch-speaking Northern part. Linguistically speaking, the French language was a lingua franca of Europe at that time and economically speaking, in contrast to current situation, French-speaking Wallonia was much more industrialised and prosperous than Dutch-speaking Flanders.

The Belgian National Congress was dominated by French-speaking elites from both Wallonia and Flanders and the government was highly centralised like France's model (Popelier & Cantillon 2013). The imposition of French throughout governmental levels created resentment among Flemish people. Until 1870s, all criminal and civil trials were conducted only in French. However, according to a report of the European Commission conducted by Weil et al (2002), it shows that even today, the majority of the legal systems among EU member states such as Belgium, Greece, Italy, Luxembourg, Netherlands, Portugal and Spain still originate from the French legal system. And French not English, by custom, is the common language and the internal working language of the Court of Justice of the European Union according to the Court's website. Therefore, the use of French in all civil and criminal trials in Belgium could be, to some extents, justified back to 19th century. In 1873, Dutch was eventually used in criminal trials and in administrative matters (1878) and education (1883). The 1898 "Law of Equality" validates both Dutch and French in official documents. The linguistic legislation in 1932 and 1935 gave rise for the creation of "two monolingual regions" and "on the basis of the territorial line". Since 1960s, the economic weight of each region changed. Flanders has surpassed Wallonia and become economically dominant, mainly because of the collapse of the backbone of Wallonia's heavy industries such as coal mining (Hambye, 2009, Mnoonkin and Verbeke, 2009, Poelmans, 2012)

1.4 The evolution of institutional structural change

The structural transformation of the Belgian economy between the northern and southern parts accelerates the political transformation of the Kingdom. A federal structure gradually emerged and replaced the old strong and unitary national system. Today, power and responsibility are being exercised by each linguistic community (French, Dutch/Flemish and German) and by territorially based regions (French-speaking Wallonia, Flemish/Dutch-speaking Flanders and bilingual Brussels Capital).

Given the change in economic and political powers between the two regions, several proposals have been made since 1970s. Four potential scenarios were identified by Beaufays (1988). The first scenario is that "Belgium will keep on muddling through as it has done so far, from crisis to crisis", in other word, the status quo at the time he was writing this research paper remains as it was. The next scenario is to adopt the "standard federalism" like the one in the United States. However, Beaufays thinks that such a system is unlikely to success, given the unstable nature of the dual federalist arrangement as well as unique nature of the Belgian state. The third scenario is to divide Belgium "into two confederal or fully separate sovereignties". Beaufays points out Belgium as a single entity could be maintained while such a proposal could be rejected due to the economic and monetary unity being put at risk. The forth scenario is also

the most pessimistic scenario is the disappearance of Belgium and the establishment of two independent states: Wallonia and Flanders or for the two regions to merge with France and the Netherlands respectively. Two decades later, Moon (2007) and Moon and Verbeke (2009) propose four possibilities which are not much different from what Beaufays proposed, including the possibility of the eventual break-up of Belgium. One of the possibilities that seems to be different is that “the national government might be strengthened, and policies adopted to mitigate the language-based cleavage and reinforce Belgian national identity”. However, Moon (2007) immediately points out that this scenario is “extremely unlikely” because he proposes that the federal government might adopt policies that makes the entire Kingdom bilingual but the separate (federated) language communities are actually in control of their own linguistic ones. Popelier and Cantillon (2013) conclude, after the 2010 political crisis in Belgium, that there remain two options: firstly, Belgium would transform “into a loose, confederal state structure” and secondly, “more cohesion within the federal structure” need to be created. Flemish region is in favour of the first option while its neighbour leans to the other one as Flemish region want to enjoy more decentralisation and less transfer of wealth from the richer Flanders to the poorer Wallonia through social security programmes. However, Popelier and Cantillon don’t see splitting or the status quo of the central security system are options for the future. Flamand (2019)’s work found that partial decentralisation “cannot always serve as a way to prevent [secessionist conflict] even though it is “wasteful” [of resources]. Flamand’s models predicts that

“...non-reversible decentralization is not self-enforcing. Yet, even though decentralization eventually leads to secession, it still constitutes a way to maintain peace, while postponing full secession to some distant future. Think of a country like Belgium, which has witnessed multiple rounds of decentralization, which can reasonably be considered to be a non-reversible process...”

In other words, decentralisation can only postpone the “eventual date of secession” or the scenario of the break-up of Belgium is unavoidable, it is only the matter of time.

After a brief review of what have been proposed and implemented to solve the highly complicated situation of Belgium regarding its languages, there are a few points that can be taken away. Firstly, the responsibility of linguistic management has been gradually transferred from other states (such as The United Kingdom of the Netherlands) to the Belgian government upon the creation of the new Kingdom of Belgium. Secondly, thanks to the economic power of the south and the important of the French language in Europe, the government which was dominated by francophone elite was able to impose French as the only national language of the newly created kingdom. Thirdly, due to the size of the population as well as the Flemish movement, together with the change in the economic structure of Belgium, Dutch/Flemish language gradually gain more recognition and Flemish region has become economically, politically and culturally dominant in Belgium and things starts to get more complicated in the way the central government could handle. Since 1970s, the new political model of (dual) federalism has emerged to replace the unitary model that has been employed since 1830s and the federalism appears to be the most likely possible solution for Belgium as pointed out by many researchers even until now. The scenario of the eventual break-up of Belgium also starts to emerge as an accepted possible outcome of the current federal structure. Fourthly, since 1970s, the responsibility linguistic management has been now transferred further from the

central government to the regional government. Finally, even though the core and fundamental problem of the current Belgian political, social and cultural crisis lies in the fact Belgium does not have a single national language, no suggestion for the creation of a single national language has been found so far.

A few questions now emerge. Firstly, if creating a national language could solve the current situation, who will be responsible for that since the power has now been decentralised to regional governments. Secondly, will the responsibility of linguistic management will be decentralised further such as from regional governments to businesses?

2. Research on language

By the time the federal model appeared in Belgium, research on language starts to emerge globally and independently. Zhang and Grenier (2012) found that the economics of language, “as an interdisciplinary subject” was born in 1965 and Jacob Marschak is thought to be the founding father of that field with his work being published in the same year. Knapik (2009) states that research on pidgin and creole “has long been neglected in linguistics and researchers started to pay more attention on the field in the late 1960s. In the field of international or multinational business, the role of language has been addressed since 1970s (Brannen et al, 2014).

2.1 Why does language become an attractive research field?

2.1.1 At the macro-level

After the second World War, countries (mostly from Africa and Asia) gained independence, many countries had to make decisions on which official language(s) should be promoted after having been colonised for decades even centuries (e.g. the biggest former Belgian colony, now Democratic Republic of Congo has adopted French as its official language even after gaining independence). In addition, “as a product of the times” the linguistic challenges and struggle between anglophone and francophone in Canada gives rise for the earliest research on economics of language. Last but not least, the process of globalisation and internationalisation makes communication become increasingly important (Zhang and Grenier, 2012).

2.1.2 At the micro-level

After the second World War, globalisation and internationalisation make communication more important. However, this should not be understood that communication before that time did not have any role at all. The interaction between people who do not share the same language and culture, for trade and business purposes for example, usually gives impetus for the creation of pidgin and creole (Knapik, 2009) and Knapik also points out that there is no agreement on a single definition of what are pidgin and creole among researchers. Therefore, understanding how pidgin and creole were created, evolve and function is important (Baptista, 2005)

In addition, the collapse of the colonial system also brings an end to the fact that capitalists and imperialists could no longer use their “absolute power” to impose their rules on other societies and negotiation is “more likely to succeed” in post-colonial days when it comes to different viewpoint (Hodstede, 2010). This means companies operating in other markets cannot simply impose forcefully their native languages on other markets and foreign consumers and, according to Sanden (2016), employees become more diverse as many workers become more mobile and seek opportunities abroad.

2.2 Research on Language and Belgium

Literature reviews on the economic of language are well documented by Grin (1994) and Zhang and Grenier (2012). However, it is Canada, not Belgium, that has been paid a great deal of attention for decades. No single word for “Belgium” can be found in their literatures. Van Tubergen and Wierenga (2011) appear to agree with this point when regarding the Belgian case as “a yet-unexploited context” when doing research on immigrants and language acquisition. Van Tubergen and Wierenga found that investing in the second language in French-speaking Wallonia is more economically attractive than doing so in Dutch-speaking Flanders due to high unemployment in Wallonia. And in general, immigrations opt for French, instead of Dutch despite the economic dominance of the Dutch-speaking region. This is because French language is more widely used than Dutch. Ortega and Verdugo (2015), even though focusing on Canada, expect “intuitively” that their results can be extended to other countries with asymmetric bilingualism such as Spain and Belgium. One of the results, if put in the Belgian context, can be understood as: a large Dutch-speaking minority deter strongly the learning of French in francophone cities. However, this result seems to be contradicted with what van Tubergen and Wierenga have found that is: “Turkish immigrants invest more in French in the Dutch region than they learn Dutch in the French region”. One of the problems when comparing Canada and Belgium is that, majority should not be translated into dominance in the Belgian context. In other words, even though Dutch is spoken by the majority of Belgians, French is much more dominant than Dutch on the global scale. Francophone Belgians “shed light on what characterises minorization” (Hambye, 2009). Van Herck and Vermandere (2016) found that the language policy of Belgium does not match the policy of the state-owned, public company and the language beliefs and practices of its employees. All Belgian public servants whose roles require the use of more than one official language are entitled to a language bonus, but in fact only employees working in Brussels receive the bonus. Some procedures of the focused public company are also in conflict with the federal law 1966 regarding the entry requirement for its potential employees.

In sum, research on Belgian languages appears to be relatively new compared to Canada’s. When it comes to language acquisition, French is a preferred choice among immigrations. Moreover, the responsibility of linguistic management seems to have been transferred further down from the federal government to regional governments and then to businesses. And what businesses are doing does not necessarily comply with the central government’s law and regulation. English has also been suggested as a lingua franca or one of the national languages of Belgium but remain relatively new in research.

This part is to discuss the work of Ortega and Verdugo (2015) which focuses on bilingual Canada, but the results of the research paper are thought to be generalisable into other asymmetric bilingual cases such as Spain and Belgium by the two researchers.

1. Ontology and Epistemology

The ontological stand of this research paper appears to be objectivist or realist. The paper studies immigrant assimilation under asymmetric bilingualism. Despite the fact that the individual determinants of immigrant assimilation have been well researched in multilingual cases, the two researchers point out that there remain two key missing elements. The first element is whether immigrants are deterred to be assimilated into the weak language by the presence of the country's dominant-language speakers. Secondly, the mechanism of the commonly-founded negative correlations between language assimilation and the presence of the co-mother tongue speakers remains ambiguous. Regarding the second element, the negative correlation might reflect that the incentives to learn the location's dominant language deteriorate with the presence of many co-mother tongue speakers (learning) or simply those immigrants whose knowledge of the location's majority language is low deliberately choose locations in which many co-mother tongue speakers present (sorting). To disentangle the effects of learning and sorting, the two researchers rely on quantitatively empirical literature of others, notably Lazear (1999 & 2007).

The empirical model is an (economic) regression model where the degree of language assimilation is regressed against a set of individual characteristics, language composition of city and time spent in the host country. Secondary data from the 2001 and 2006 Canadian Censuses were used for the regression. Having said that, the two researchers only tried to understand the "reality" of language assimilation through quantitative measurement.

There remains, however, some limitations with the usage of secondary data from the censuses. The ablest immigrants might choose to settle in locations with few co-mother tongue speakers as they can pick up the location's dominant language easily so "ability or willingness" can act as a crucial determinant for sorting. However, as pointed out by the two researchers, "the model cannot distinguish more complex but theoretically plausible forms of sorting". The challenge of measuring language-learning ability of individuals remains as data is cross sectional, not longitudinal. The educational level was used as an alternative for language-learning ability. In short, the two researchers used objective method such as observation of educational level to understand the language-learning ability instead of asking people about their thought of what determines language-learning ability. Having said that, the epistemological stand of this paper is positivist.

2. Axiology

There are a few reasons why the two researchers had decided to select Canada instead of other bilingual countries such as Spain or Belgium. Firstly, unlike Spain and Belgium where only one language is an international language, both French and English are international languages in the case of Canada, therefore, "the extent of this asymmetry is unclear". Secondly, the Canadian censuses contain richer "information on the mother tongue of individuals and their knowledge of the two official languages".

Despite some limitations with the usage of the regression model and cross-sectional data, both were still employed to disentangle the effects of sorting and learning on language assimilation.

There are two potential reasons for that. Firstly, both researchers mainly base in Europe and not in Canada. The paper was published at the time Dr Ortega was the Head of the Department of Economics and also was holding various positions in other European institutions such as CEP (LSE), CReAM (Centre for Research & Analysis of Migration) and IZA (Institute of Labor Economics) while Dr Verdugo was working at Bank of France (Banque de France) and IZA. Secondly, both researchers are economists so the use of regression with secondary data instead of other research tools such as interview on understanding the relationship between language assimilation and other social factors, given the limited direct contact with Canada, could be expected.

2.1. Reliability and validity

One problem that might prevent the results of the paper to be generalised is that the two researchers tend to use “dominant” or “dominance” (Subordinate/weak) and “majority” (minority) interchangeably without realising that “majority” does not always be translated into “dominance”. According to the online Oxford Dictionaries, “majority” refers to a greater number while “dominance” involves power and influence over other. In the case of Canada, and to some extents Spain, “majority” could be equated to “dominance” since the majority of the population speak the language which is more widely-spoken than the other, not only domestically but also globally: English-French in Canada and Spanish-Catalan in Spain. Throughout the research paper, the two researchers only give definition for “majority” but not for “dominance” (using the definition from the Canadian Census):

“... The city-majority language is defined as the language with the largest number of mother-tongue speakers according to the 100% Census tabulations for the question: “What is the language that this person first learned at home in childhood and still understands? If the person no longer understands the language learned, indicate the second language learned”. Then, an individual is considered to be a city language minority member if he/she does not have the city-majority language as (one of) his/her mother tongue(s)...” (p.6)

And both conclude:

“... While our paper focuses on Canada, we would expect intuitively our results to extend to a series of countries characterised by asymmetric bilingualism, and particularly to those countries in which one of the official languages is –at least to some extent- an international language and the other language is a relatively small one. This might be the case for instance of Belgium ...” (p.19)

To correctly determine what is the dominant language in Belgium is not as straightforward as in Canada or Spain. As pointed out in the literature review part, at the beginning of the creation of Belgium, Dutch was spoken by the majority of the whole population, however, French was the only language being recognised in 1830. This demonstrates that the French-speaking minority was the dominant group in the society economically, politically and culturally and should not be regarded as “subordinate”. However, since 1970s, Dutch speaking majority has gradually dominated Belgium both economically and politically. Paulston (2003), quoted in Ortega and Verdugo (2015), states that speakers will gradually switch from the weak to the

dominant language. If this is the case, Brussels remains a sticky point in Belgium. Brussels, the capital of Belgium as well as Flanders and Wallonia, is landlocked within the dominantly Dutch-speaking Flanders but gradually became French-speaking and remains stubbornly francophone for nearly two centuries (85% of the Brussel's population speak French). If Paulston's observation were correct, the Dutch speaking population should have been much higher in Brussels now. In short, at regional level, Dutch remains a dominant language in Flanders, excluding Brussels while if Brussels is taken into account, the situation is much harder to conclude. At the national level, Dutch language enjoys the dominant status thanks to the Dutch-speaking population accounting for the majority of the Belgian population. However, if we look closer at the statistics for bilingualism, the complexity of the relationship between "majority" and "dominance" becomes even clearer. In Belgium, the proportion of Dutch-speaking Belgians who is able to speak French is much higher (69%) than the proportion of French-speaking Belgians who is able to speak Dutch (21%). Mnoonkin (2007), Thogmartin (2008) and Mnoonkin & Verbeke, (2009). The two largest immigrant groups, Turks and Moroccan also prefer to learn more French than Dutch despite that Dutch-speaking region is more prosperous Van Tubergen and Wierenga (2011). In case of Canada, the proportion of francophone Canadians who is bilingual is much higher (46.2%) than that of anglophone Canadians who can speak French (9.2%). In other words, francophone Canadians are more than five times more likely to be bilingual than their anglophone neighbours. The Canadian case clearly reflects Paulston's observation. Having said that, the results found in the case of Canada by the two authors might be generalised only in the situation where "majority" coincides with "dominance". When it is difficult or tricky to identify which language is the dominant one, borrowing conclusions for Canada and applying for Belgium should be questioned.

Hambye (2009) points out that in spite of being a demographic minority, francophone Belgians are not a "minorized" group as they are not in a "minority situation". Flanders, on the other hand, adopts "an attitude that is more typical of a minorized group". While Hambye can clearly identify English speakers as the dominant linguistic group in Canada (page 15), in the Belgian case, each linguistic community can be referred as "dominant" depending on which aspects we want to focus on. Francophone Belgians are described as "a dominant minority in decline" in comparison with "a booming majority" or "newly dominant" Dutch-speaking Belgians.

The second issue that might impact the generalisation of Ortega and Verdugo (2015)'s research results into Belgium is that in Canada, English enjoys the dominant position at Canadian level and regional (North America) and international levels. In Belgium, however, while Dutch might dominate the national level, French dominates regional level but at the international level, English enjoys its lingua franca status. The coincidence of the dominance of the English language in all three levels make Canada a unique case and also different from Belgium. What has been written in the conclusion part could easily make readers think that French is the dominant language in Belgium when they refer to "*one of the official languages is –at least to some extent- an international language and the other language is a **relatively small one***". Since both researchers are French nationals, the equalisation of international language and dominant language should be questioned as to many aspects, Dutch actually dominates the Belgian society and demographically speaking, at the national level, Dutch is not "relatively small one". While Ortega and Verdugo only focus on domestic level (Canada), analysing the asymmetric bilingualism in which at least one of the official languages is an international one

might require the expansion of the focus outside the country's border. For example, France and Netherlands should also be taken into account when researching about Belgium. The biggest former Belgian colony, now francophone Democratic Republic of the Congo should not be ignored either. Having said that, in order to generalise the results founded for Canada, future researches also need to analyse Belgium both internally and externally.

2.2.Ethical considerations

Since the two researchers use secondary data from the Canadian Censuses 2001 and 2006 which are available on the website for the public, problems related to anonymity and confidentiality as well as privacy can be thought to have been avoided.

Powers between the two main linguistic groups in Canada, Belgium or Spain constitute political conflicts for centuries and lead to demand for secessions such as in Canada and Spain (and also Scotland 2014). In case of Belgium, comparing Dutch language as “a relatively small [language]” at the national level might trigger resentment among Dutch-speaking population of Belgium. Given the complicated history of Belgium and the linguistic oppression the Dutch-speaking part has suffered since the creation of Belgium, future researches should be careful with the wording to avoid causing more harm to the “vulnerable” group.

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