

Language management – Whose responsibility is this?

And the role of linguistic entrepreneurship in solving language-related issues in socio-linguistically divided Belgium

Abstract: It is important to figure out who are manager(s) or administrator(s) in the management and administration fields. Businesses have paid more attention to language management in recent decades and researchers have increasingly tried to understand this new phenomenon. However, why this is a new phenomenon remains largely unknown. What businesses are doing with new responsibilities might reinforce the already hostile environment in multilingual societies. Businesses appear to be not in a position of becoming “linguistic entrepreneurs” to solve the multilingual issues even with the advance of new technologies. Since central governments are not as actively as before in regulating languages, should the responsibility of minimising the linguistic issues rely on young people in Belgium?

A. Introduction

Research on languages has become a new phenomenon in many different fields, including business administration. Managing the use of languages has increasingly consumed a great deal of attention from business leaders, especially those running multinational enterprises. The labour workforce has become increasingly more diverse and mobile while emerging markets, where consumers’ mother tongues are not European languages, have gradually taken the responsibility of driving world’s economic growth such as India, Indonesia, China and Vietnam.

However, this should not be understood that linguistically diverse workforce and the growing importance of non-European-languages-speaking countries are recent phenomenon. Cross-border, cross-continental and cross-oceanic trades have been taking place for thousand years between people speaking different languages while China and India had dominated the world’s economy well before the industrial revolution took place in Europe.

Despite huge efforts being spent on understanding the role of languages, the main reason(s) behind why language management, in the context of business administration, being a new phenomenon remain largely unexplained. Is the responsibility of managing languages created from nowhere or has it been transferred to enterprises? Beside trying to explore this undiscovered territory, this paper also wants to understand the implication of businesses taking control of language management on wider society, particularly in Belgium.

B. The emergence of research on language

Researchers from different fields started to focus on the role of languages since 1960s. Zhang and Grenier (2012) whose literature review covers the evolution of language in economic field state that the economics of language first appeared in 1965 in the work of Jacob Marschak published in Behavioral Science. The basic idea of Marschak’ work is that there exists a close connection between “*the explorations of language optimization and economics*” and language has all economic characteristics and is “*indispensable tool in human economic activities*”. Grin (1994) wrote that ethnic and linguistic characteristics were assumed to play a neglectable role in understanding resource allocation in economics in “*long-standing tradition*”. Zhang and Grenier also point out two scenarios which gave rise to the research on language. Firstly, after the Second World War, some countries had to decide what national language(s) should be promoted after gaining

independence from European colonialists. Secondly, the linguistic struggle between the English and French speaking parts in Canada also attracted attention from researchers.

In another linguistic research area, Knapik (2009) shows that the study of pidgins and creoles in linguistics has been marginalized or paid little attention until late 1960s. According to Knapik, interactions between people, for trade, business or any other purposes, who do not speak the same language encourage a quick means of communication to emerge. Pidgins and creoles are usually the result of such interactions. However, there is no single definition for pidgins and creoles that have been approved by all researchers according to Knapik. Baptista (2005), for example, thinks the creation of pidgins and creoles emerged primarily orally “in the sociohistorical context of slavery”, predominantly resulted from a mix between a European languages and African languages. Sharing a similar definition, Washabaugh and Greenfield (1981) expands their research back to late fifteenth and early sixteenth centuries when European powers, such as the Portuguese, started to trade across Atlantic Ocean. In the new Plantation Society, “colonists found themselves owning fealty to the unitary cultural model of the nation-state” and [Portuguese] colonies “were expected, indeed required, to express a Portuguese national identity”. The need for cultural identification tends to result in linguistic assimilation. However, since everyone is an immigrant, including colonists and slaves, who has different cultural and linguistic background, everyone, “for the sake of survival”, adopted Portuguese language with their own lexicon. However, the exclusion of slaves from participating socially and culturally in the new world encourage them to create their own identity and culture and the gradual emergence of creoles is thought to be an unavoidable result. In the modern world, even when employees are not forcefully required to be culturally and linguistically assimilated, the choice of language in internal communication, which will be discussed in other parts of my research, might exclude employees from assimilating themselves with the company’s culture. Lou and Shenkar (2006) points out that the majority of Citigroup employees (60%) do not speak English and language acts as a barrier that excludes the effective participation between subunits and headquarter.

Literature review on language in the field of business management has been well documented by Brannen et al (2014). Brannen et al (2014) identifies that “the field of [International Business] (IB) has addressed the role of language(s) since 1970s” while Sanden (2016) states that “Over the last two decades, a growing number of scholars have taken an interest in language and language strategies in international business”. Even though the timings appear to be slightly different between the two researches, both periods took place only after the end of World War Two, therefore, are still in line with other fields of linguistic researches. According to Brannen et al (2014), the early works regard language as an external factor. For example, language plays a crucial role when it comes to “selecting foreign markets and selling to overseas customers” in the field of international marketing and exporting or “linguistically aligned services” help increase market share in health services and tourism. However, as time goes by, issues of managing languages have been internalised into businesses’ day-to-day operations and management. As a result, the promotion of internal lingua franca, coupling with the dominance of English language give rise for the creations of new terms and concepts such as “language standardization by headquarters”, “anglicization”, “Englishization” or “corporate Englishization”. While the language construct has been linked to the construct of national culture such as work of Hofstede (1984), some other researchers decouple language from culture such as Brannen and Thomas (2010) who suggest that bi/multicultural does not automatically translate into bi/multilingual. In addition, linguistic studies undertaken by individual researchers have been joined together “into a recognizable body of language-sensitive perspectives on the operations of the MNC”. Another new focus of linguistic management in MNC is on disadvantages of adopting English as internal lingua franca.

Linguistic research also sets its foot on entrepreneurship but much later compared to other fields. One of the most notable works in this field is of Costa et al (2016) on linguistic entrepreneurship and language education. They acknowledge that “linguistic entrepreneur” is not a new term and has been explored as early as 1998. However, their work takes a different approach to this term which was traditionally related to “brokers

between linguistically and culturally distinct groups”. Under neoliberal society, language learner acts as linguistic entrepreneur who exploits “language-related resources” for the sake of “one’s worth in the world”.

In this paper, I want to take a different approach to “linguistic entrepreneur” which can be understood not in terms of language learner but of language creator – someone who creates (a) new language(s). Before exploring more about “linguistic entrepreneur”, we should understand why language happens to be a relatively new research area.

1. Why is research on language a new phenomenon?

1.1. “Nation” as a new invention

In a well-known book *Cultures and Organizations: Software for the Mind*, 3rd Edition (2010), Hofstede writes:

“The invention of nations, ... is a recent phenomenon in human history. Earlier, there were states, ... The nation system was introduced world-wide only in the mid-twentieth century. It followed the colonial system ...” (pp. 20-21)

The United Nations defines “nation” on its website as:

“The nation as we think of it today is a product of the nineteenth century. ...

After the First World War ... 'National' came to mean anything run or regulated by the state, ...”

According to the two definitions of the UN and Hofstede (2010), as the term “nation” (or “national”) has been only coined between the nineteenth century and the mid-twentieth century, the terms “multinational”, “international” or “transnational” should emerge no earlier than 19th century. Having said that, we can understand that because of international / multinational businesses being relatively new concepts, research on languages in the field of IB / MNC also emerges as a relatively new phenomenon. Therefore, the fundamental reason for research on language being relatively new is just because of the way we name things. As a result, we need not care about from where the responsibility of managing languages has been created or transferred.

However, when it comes to multinational business organisations, Hofstede (2010) wrote:

“If intercultural encounters are as old as humanity, multinational business is as old as organized states. Business professor Karl Moore and historian David Lewis have described four cases of multinational business in the Mediterranean area between 1900 and 100 B.c., ...” (p.402)

Despite “nation” being a recent phenomenon in human history, the usage of the term “multinational”, instead of “multistate”, in the above context contradicts with what has been defined earlier. However, if “multinationals” have existed for at least 4000 years, does this mean that the role of language in business administration has never been addressed seriously before 1960s?

Apart from the term “multinational”, “international” or “transnational” being used well beyond the nineteenth century, there is also a tendency to equate the two terms “multinational” and “multilingual”. Brannen et al (2014) states:

“... In doing so, we ... understand[ing] the multinational corporation (MNC) as a multilingual meeting ground and provide the beginnings of a protocol for conducting language research in IB ...” (pp. 496-497)

While Sanden (2016) refers to Barner-Rasmussen and Björkman, (2007)’s work that:

“... TNC/MNC ... are multilingual organisations almost by definition, and multilingual situations occur at all organisational levels on an everyday basis ...”

There are a few problems of equating “multinational” and “multilingual”. Firstly, not all multinational or transnational or international corporations severely experience the problems of multilingualism. For example, English companies invest in other countries where English language dominates like the US, Australia, New Zealand or Canada. And as the use of English language undisputedly dominates many aspects of life, the burden of biculturality is transferred from English-speaking multinationals to foreign nationals and “*most American executives in multinationals are monolingual*” according to Hofstede (2010). Marschan-Piekkari (1999) shows that there is a clear tendency for companies to invest in other countries which use the same language as theirs. The issue of “*Psychic (or cultural) distance*” remains significant according to Marschan-Piekkari. One can, therefore, think of such organisations which prefer to invest in similar linguistic environments as psychic prison – one of metaphors developed by Gareth Morgan (1986). In other words, they are trapped by the success and dominance of the mother tongue language (e.g. English) and, as a result, prefer to remain in the environment that is familiar to them. In addition, organisations imposing their home language(s) which is (are) thought to be internationally dominant such as English, French, Spanish, Chinese (mandarin), etc. on overseas subunits or operations can be thought as instruments of domination. In other words, those organisations can be thought as an instrument to further capitalise on the already dominant position of such languages. Many researchers such as Tietze and Dick (2013) have been researching on “linguistic imperialism” of English language. On the other hand, enterprises which are willing to take risks in different linguistic environments can be referred as “organismic organisations” which are open to the environment and always try to adapt for their survivals. Domestic companies are also as likely to face the problems of multilingualism as multinational companies do if the domestic markets are highly multilingual such as the US or Belgian markets.

Secondly, while the terms “national” and “multinational” et al are recent phenomenon, “multilingual”, in contrast, is not a recent phenomenon as cross-border, cross-regional, cross-continental and cross-oceanic trades have taken place for thousand years and it is nearly impossible to find evidence that all ancient states, empires or any other ancient political entities all spoke the same language.

In conclusion, as the term “nation” is recognised as a relatively new invention, restricting the concept of “multinational” or “international” or “transnational” to recent time makes an impression that the strategic role of language has never been explored systematically before, even though not many people really pay attention to this. Focusing solely on the period since mid-twentieth century might not help answer what happened with language management in the past.

1.2.The role of governments and individuals in language management

1.2.1 The role of individuals

Brannen et al (2014) points out that one of the recent developments of the language stream in International business is “*the shift from viewing language exclusively as a skill that resides in the individual to considering it as a constitutive, collective force contained in the MNC*”. As mentioned earlier, in the field of economics of language, Grin (1994) and Zhang and Grenier (2012) have admitted that the role of language or linguistic characteristics were largely ignored in understanding the economic interactions between two economic agents. However, language is now seen as “an indispensable tool in human economic activities. Human capital theory and economics of education further emphasize the impact of language acquisition or investment in language on individuals. Relationship between language and economic status has been also focused.

As we can see from the above discussions, while the field of economic of language focuses on language skills of individual, international business field has moved the focus of the strategic role of language away from

individuals to (international) businesses. Therefore, what Brannen et al (2014) claims that there exists a shift from individual to businesses simply reflects the shift towards the research interest of IB researchers, given that their work was published in “Journal of International Business Studies”, and not necessary explains the main causes in the shift of language management responsibility.

1.2.2 The role of governments

This part will try to discover the role of governments in managing languages in the nineteenth century onward when the notion of “nation” was first coined (using the UN’s definition).

Moore (2015) makes an interesting comparisons between language strategies between the French “revolutionary monolingualism” and the current EU “reactionary multilingualism”. The 1794 Decree *“calls for the universal adoption of French by all citizens, and the annihilation and extirpation from French soil of all the forms of speech (‘dialects’, patois, etc.) that diverge from the national standard”*. Gadet and Ludwig (2014) confirms that systematic suppression or, in other words, the standardisation of the French language. According to Moore (2015), Gadet and Ludwig (2014), Abbé Henri Grégoire’s report *“On the necessity and means to annihilate the patois and to universalize the use of the French language”* in 1794 is the clear effort of the French Republic to regulate the use of French language not just for the benefit of the survival of the Republic itself but also for the benefit of the internal trade.

After the end of the Napoleonic War in 1815, which took place after French revolution, the United Kingdom of the Netherlands was established as a result of the Congress of Vienna 1814-15. The newly created kingdom covers mostly now the Netherlands (the northern part), Belgium (the southern part) and Luxembourg. To unite the newly created kingdom, William I of the House of Orange – King of the Netherlands set out his decrees (de Taalbesluiten) to promote the use of Dutch (Donaldson, 1983). One of the main reasons is because the southern elites (now Belgium) were in favour of French even though the majority of the southern population spoke Flemish/Dutch. While the southern population (Belgium) followed Roman Catholics, Protestant dominated the northern part (the Netherlands). Not surprisingly, William I’s ambition did not last long as his decrees faced strong resistance from the French-speaking southern elites. Seven years later, the Belgian revolution broke out that laid the foundation for the creation of the kingdom of Belgium in 1830.

At the very first days of the creation of Belgium, Flemish/Dutch was marginalised while French was recognised as a sole national language given that it was spoken by the minority of the Belgian population. The imposition of French at all governmental levels created resentment among Flemish people. It is not until 1873 when Dutch was used in criminal trials, and it took another 5 more years for Dutch to be used in administrative matter and in education in 1883. The 1898 Law of Equality validates both Dutch and French in official documents. The linguistic legislation passed between 1932 and 1935 gave way for the emergence of the two monolingual regions. At the moment, Belgian federal government is no longer responsible for language management, the regional governments are now in charge of their own linguistic policies. (Hambye, 2009, Mnoonkin and Verbeke, 2009, Poelmans, 2012)

At the supranational level, the European Union (EU) does not try to promote any single language like in the case of France, the Netherlands or Belgium in the past. Instead, the EU recognises 24 official languages ⁽¹⁾ and also promotes “mother-tongue-plus-two” repertoire which means *“Europeans should speak their mother tongue plus two other languages, one for business and one for pleasure”* (EurActiv 25 March 2009), quoted in Moore (2015).

In contrast to the current EU’s approaches to languages, since the creation of the UK in 1707, English has been accepted as the only working language in the UK parliament even though each nation within the union has its own language. Interestingly, more than three centuries after, in 2016, the demand to end the Welsh language ban (the ban of the use of Welsh in the UK parliament) was rejected by British ministers. Some

members of parliament argued that doing so would cost taxpayers money on translation facilities which is obviously not the excuse made by the EU ⁽²⁾.

What we can see is that governments had played an active role in regulating the use of single language, in other words, promoting linguistic assimilation. However, the political will to regulate languages among Western government as well as at the supranational level of the EU seems to have diminished. The question now is whether the responsibility in regulating or managing languages has been transferred from the governments to businesses?

Domestically, in the cases of the UK, France, the Netherlands and Belgium, the implementation of a single national language goes hand in hand with the use of force. For example, William I was willing to take military action to take over Belgium when the southern part declared independence. It is not until 1839 when the Netherlands finally recognized the new Belgian state. While internationally, the spread of European languages globally was strengthened by the expansion of European imperialism. Hofstede (2010) writes:

“In colonial days, foreigners often wielded absolute power in other societies, and they could impose their rules on it. In these post-colonial days, in contrast, foreigners who want to change something in another society will have to negotiate their interventions. ...” (p.26)

After the WWII when most colonized countries gained independence, the use of the absolute power by foreigners, especially by Western European governments and companies have been diminished. This gives way for the responsibility of language management to be taken out of the hand of Western European governments and companies not just domestically but also globally.

Enterprises operating overseas, especially European ones, now have to negotiate more with foreign markets, including the use of languages. It can now be made clearer that the responsibility of managing languages has been transferred from governments to businesses, especially for European companies. And if it is the case, what are multinational companies doing with the new responsibility? Are they promoting linguistic assimilation or linguistic diversity? What are implications of their linguistic strategies on a wider society?

2. The development of machine translation

2.1 The brief history of the development of machine translation

This section is based on the work of William John Hutchins ⁽³⁾, an English linguist and information scientist. According to William, the earliest versions of machine translation (MT) date back in 1930s. Georges Artsrouni and Petr Trojanskij pioneered in the field of MT with two patents issued in France and USSR (Russia) respectively in 1933.

In 1951, the first MT conference was organised at Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT). In 1954, a collaboration between IBM and Georgetown “*resulted in the first demonstration of a [Anglo-Russian] MT system*”. Such a demonstration attracted a great deal of attention around the world and began to stimulate large-scale funding in America. Mechanical Translation journal - the first MT journal - was launched in 1954.

In mid-1960s, many countries across the world had established their own MT research groups and the optimism was high during this period. However, the complexity of linguistic problems became more apparent. In 1966, the Automatic Language Processing Advisory Committee (ALPAC) in the US, that examines government sponsoring MT programmes, concluded that MT could not outperform while cost twice as much as human translation and “*there is no immediate or predictable prospect of useful machine translation*” (ALPAC 1966). That report was thought to bring an end to MT research in the US and elsewhere for a decade.

From mid-1970s and throughout 1980s, the driving force for further research and development on cost-effective MT had shifted from traditionally demands for translation of scientific and technical documents to demands from multilingual communities and multinational companies for administrative and commercial purposes.

In early 1990s, the focus of MT had moved “*from ‘pure’ research to practical applications, to the development of translator workstations for professional translators, to work on controlled language and domain-restricted systems, and to the application of translation components in multilingual information systems*”. These trends have continued in late 1990s and early 2000s. the “*use of MT ad translation aids (translator workstations)*” by large multinational companies has further consolidated these trends. Sales of MT software accelerated while online translation networked services have become increasingly available.

Internet users being familiar with Google Translate, Bing Microsoft Translator, Apple’s Siri, Amazon’s Alexa and Microsoft’s Cortana as a result of multinationals investing heavily in speech recognition and translation.

2.2 Why do we continue to invest on MT development?

Can human being communicate with each other without the existence of machine translation? The answer is apparently yes since MT is just a new invention less than 100 years ago in comparison to thousands of years of human evolution.

To foster communication, in the absence of technology, between two people A and B who speak completely different languages, there are a few possible solutions to overcome linguistic barriers. Firstly, either A or B is bilingual, Secondly, both A and B become bilingual. Thirdly, A and B adopt another language called C (English is a good example nowadays). Fourthly, A and B can hire a human translator who must be bilingual in both languages of A and B. Finally, instead of adopting language C, A and B can (mutually) create another language called AB. Most people might be more familiar with the first four scenarios but less so with the last one. However, as discussed earlier in section 1, the creation of pidgins and creoles in the case of Portuguese colonies emerged as a way to overcome linguistic barriers.

Esperanto is another example of the effort to bridge the gap in communication in the context of multilingualism. Esperanto was created by Ludwik Lejzer Zamenhof and first launched in 1887, however, it is not the only recently planned language to date (Fiedler, 2018). Thanks to its regularity and logic of its word creation, Esperanto can also be used to improve the quality of MT. Gobbo (2015) concludes that MT and Esperanto “*are two different ways to deal with the same problem: the problem of communication across language barriers*”.

With the advancement of technology, creating a new language seems to be much easier and quicker than anytime in the past. Fiedler (2018) states that planned languages “*has probably reached almost 1000 already*”. In an article published on the Economist, S.C.S ⁽⁴⁾ goes further saying that “*constructed languages, in various stages of completion, now outnumber the world’s natural tongues*”. Even though technology is credited for its helpfulness in “*generating words or applying sound changes to age the language artificially*”, the author recognises the role of human in the creation process. One interesting thing to note in the article is that much of those newly created languages were invented by individuals and not by (multinational) firms.

If language can be “easily” created thanks to new technology, why do not many (multinational) companies become “linguistic entrepreneur”? Even if companies adopted the most widely spoken Esperanto, which has around two million speakers worldwide, there is no way to guarantee customers will adopt a new language. Economic factors clearly play an important role in the spread of any language, but throughout history, military force strengthens the adoption of foreign languages both domestically and abroad, be it the case of Greek, Latin, French, English, Portuguese, Spanish, Russian, Chinese or Arabic. However, military force has been mostly, but not totally, taken out of hand of multinational enterprises in the post-colonial days. It is hard to

imagine today any multinational megacorporation that could have its own “*private armies [which] were larger than those of almost all nation-state [at that time]*” and “*its power encircled the globe*” like East Indian Company, claimed William Dalrymple – A Scottish historian ⁽⁵⁾.

In short, machine translation exists partly because of the gradual disappearance of “absolute power” as well as of human failure to adopt a common language. And if “absolute power” is not exercised, what companies are doing to overcome multilingual problems?

C. Case studies

1. Aetna

Aetna - a multinational health insurance company established in 1853 in the US ⁽⁶⁾ - is chosen because the firm needs not operate overseas to face linguistic challenges. The US Census Bureau 2011 report records over 300 languages spoken in the US, while, unlike Belgium, no federal official languages are recognised.

Aetna offers services in nearly 70 different languages “at no cost” to clients ⁽⁷⁾. But, is this always a good thing? Paulston (2003) observes that over generations, the population of the weaker language will adopt the language of the dominant group and as we can see, in the US, the dominant language is undoubtedly English. Ortega and Verdugo (2015) found a negative correlation between the presence of co-mother tongue speakers in the location and language assimilation. In short, Aetna’s strategy to provide free translation services (un)intendedly deter non-English speaking customers from being assimilated into the dominant English-speaking society. Contrastingly but unsurprisingly, there is no evidence Aetna provides translation services for its workforce and allows them to use whatever languages they like for internal work communications.

When the responsibility of language management has been transferred from governments to businesses, linguistic diversity triumphs linguistic assimilation. What will happen at macro level?

2. Belgium

In December 2018, the Prime Minister of Belgium Charles Michel resigned and has remained as head of the caretaker government after his coalition government collapsed ⁽⁸⁾. Caretaker government has recently become part of Belgian politics, especially in 2010 when no federal government was formed for more than 530 days after the general election ⁽⁹⁾. The actual cause of the recent collapse runs much deeper in Belgian society, even before the its creation. Several solutions have been proposed and implemented to mitigate conflicts between the two main linguistic communities: northern Dutch-speaking Flanders and southern francophone Wallonia.

French was the only language recognised when Belgium was established in 1830 and francophone Wallonia dominated economically and politically. However, Dutch/Flemish gradually gained more recognition and since 1960s, Flanders has surpassed Wallonia economically, 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). The conflicts between the two communities get worse since. A monolingual Belgium created in 1830 has turned into a country which now recognises three official languages. However, promoting multilingualism does not end the nearly-two-century-old conflict in Belgium. The scenario of the eventual break-up of Belgium has also been increasingly accepted as unavoidable (Flamand, 2019). Regional governments, not the central governments, are responsible for their own language policies. However, due to the complexity of the political system, Van Herck and Vermandere (2016) found there is a difference between regional language policies and that of a (state-owned) company. This demonstrates that the responsibility of managing languages, to some extends, now rests on the shoulder of Belgian companies. English has been suggested as a problem solver ⁽¹⁰⁾ while the idea of creating a new language for Belgium remains largely untouched.

Bijinens and Koning (2018) study about the “declining business dynamism in Belgium”. Although, the causes of such decline remain unknown to the two researchers, they link the decline with the “*increased use of ICT*” (Innovation and Communication Technology). One of the arguments is that, ICT adoption is a “*fixed cost*”, therefore, smaller enterprises might not be able to catch up with the ICT revolution while companies which successfully invested in ICT become more “*dominant*”. If we recall the growing investment in Machine translation partly commercially partly reflect the failure of people around the world to adopt a common language. The future research can also touch on whether having a common language will boost the business dynamism in Belgium again?

If the responsibility of managing languages has mostly been given up by the Belgian federal government while enterprises have a tendency of promoting linguistic diversity, partly thanks to the advance of machine translation, my future research will focus on who will be acting as linguistic entrepreneur to solve the Belgian linguistic dilemmas?

D. Methodology

The future research will be understood through the lens of the social choice theory. The social choice theory consists of several models which concern collective decision processes. The main questions are: “*How can a group of individuals choose a winning outcome (e.g., policy, electoral candidate) from a given set of options? What are the properties of different voting systems? When is a voting system democratic? How can a collective (e.g., electorate, legislature, collegial court, expert panel, or committee) arrive at coherent collective preferences or judgments on some issues, on the basis of its members' individual preferences or judgments? How can we rank different social alternatives in an order of social welfare? Social choice theorists study these questions not just by looking at examples, but by developing general models and proving theorems.*” (List, 2013)

Looking around the world, many multilingual countries recognise a language which is spoken by the majority of the population as the main (sole) official language of those countries such as Putonghua (also known as Mandarin) in China and Vietnamese in Vietnam. However, (un)surprisingly, it needs not always require the acceptance from the majority of the whole population of a country (at least more than 50 percent) for a particular language to become the (sole) national and official language. As mentioned above, Belgium only recognised French as the sole official language when it was created in 1830 and the language has always been spoken only by the minority of the Belgian population. Dutch and German only gained official recognitions in the twentieth century. However, promoting linguistic diversity as well as federal political structure do not solve the enduring (language-related) issues ò Belgium. In addition, under the current political climate, pushing for a language spoken only by a small group of elites or minority as a sole national language appears to be undemocratic and unreasonable. The consensus among the majority of Belgians remains critical for the unity as well as survival of the Belgian state. Any future adoption of any (new) official language in Belgium apparently requires acceptance of the majority of the Belgian population. But, to understand the notion “majority” is not always straightforward.

1. Majority and Dominance - Minority and Subordination

Ortega and Verdugo (2015) carried out research on linguistic assimilation in multilingual cities in the Canadian context. The two researchers expect their results to be generalisable into other asymmetric bilingual cases such as Spain and Belgium. However, one problem that might prevent the results from being extended to Belgium is that the two researchers tend to use “*dominant*” or “*dominance*” (Subordinate/weak) and “*majority*” (minority) interchangeably without realising that “*majority*” does not always translate 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, both domestically and globally: English-French in Canada and Spanish-Catalan in Spain. Throughout the research paper, only the definition for “*majority*” was given (using the definition from the Canadian Census) but not for “*dominance*”.

To correctly determine what is the dominant language in Belgium is not as straightforward as in Canada or Spain. 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 Brussels 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 considered, 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 and Flanders’s prosperous economy. 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 Dutch-speaking region is much more prosperous according to 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. Canada 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 results 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 national (Canada), regional (North America) and international levels. In Belgium, however, while Dutch might dominate the national level (Belgium), French dominates regional level (Western Europe) 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***”. The equalisation of an international language as a dominant language should be questioned as to many aspects, Dutch language actually dominates Belgium and is not “*relatively small one*”.

2. English language

English, interestingly, also does not escape that paradox. It is hard to think of any natural or planned language which is more dominant than English, however, the number of native English speakers represents a minority at the global scale. According to the British Council's 2013 report, there will be around two billion people speaking English around the world and the ratio between non-native and native speakers is estimated at 4:1 (...). This means that there are around 400 million people whose first language is English in comparison to more than seven billion people living on this planet.

Before English became the world's lingua franca, English has itself transformed several times from Old English (from 5th to 11th century), to Middle English (from 11th to 16th century), to Modern English (from 16th to present). Today native English speakers are thought to experience difficulty in comprehending their own ancient language.

The two characters of the English language we just contemplate tell us that firstly, quality triumphs quantity, or having the majority speaking a language is not always an existential condition for that language to be widely adopted, even that language might appear alien to other language speakers. Secondly, the alien/new language will be gradually accepted and embraced among individuals of the same linguistic community over generations. These two points, in return, suggests intuitively that if we need to introduce a new language in Belgium, we need not aim to get the majority of the population to speak that new language. The more important thing is which group actually use that language. It is natural that people get old and die, and the continuity relies on next generations. The future of Belgium at the moment is young people, especially those under 20 years old. Understanding whether adopting a new language is a preferred social choice among young Belgians as well as the willingness to learn the new language will be focused in the future study.

3. Potential ethical issues

Young Belgians will be randomly selected all four linguistic communities: French, Dutch, German and bilingual French-Dutch and three federated political entities: Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels. Since Belgian population has a high proportion immigrants and Belgians with foreign origins, interviewees should not be restricted only for Belgians who have strong Belgian backgrounds but also Belgians who share foreign origins.

In addition, individual interviews will be used to conduct the research. However, since interviewees might not be fluent in English while this is the language the researcher will employ to conduct interviews, the reliability of the quality of translations need to be taken into account.

Another issue that might arise is that while this research tries to understand whether Belgian young people are willing to adopt a new language, that "new" language has not been invented yet and when thing is unclear, people might have a tendency to refuse to adopt it. Therefore, some restrictions and conditions need to be defined clearly before interviews can be conducted.

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Reflective essay:

I found quantitative research appears to be easier than qualitative research, partly because I have never studied qualitative research before and partly because I am quite relatively good at maths and statistics. However, when I carried out the quantitative research in term 1 of the Doctor of Business Administration (DBA) course, I found some contradictions in the way respondents answered the questions. Many people answered “willing to learn the new language to help solve the problems of Belgium” in my questionnaire but when asked how many hours they are going to spend on learning the new language, many of them chose zero hours. On the other hand, those who declared not willing to learn the new language are willing to spend time on learning the new language created for Belgium to solve the linguistic issues of the country.

As I can see here, if I only employ quantitative research in my future research, I will be unable to understand why this is the case and might also be unable to explain what the main causes behind such contradictions in the way people are responded to my questionnaire. Therefore, I do believe that by using qualitative research methods such as face-to-face interviews, I will be able to understand more what Belgian people actually think and whether or not they are willing to adopt the new language. And if they are willing to do so, what are the main causes while if they refuse to do so, what are the discouraging factors and how to overcome these challenges and to convince them to change their mind.

Another reason for quantitative research being easier to me is that since English is not my first language, working with numbers might help reduce the problems of language barriers in communications for me. When I have to conduct interviews with Belgian people whose main languages are Dutch, French, German or many other foreign languages since immigrations account for a considerable share of Belgian population, misunderstanding or mistranslation or miscommunication will be the biggest challenges for me to overcome. Of course, misunderstanding of the meaning of numbers and statistical results can also happen too.

Since the political structure in Belgium is highly decentralised while the social structure is highly fragmented, it might be hard to understand the collective outcome by just using quantitative research. The research, in my opinion, is best understood at the individual level. If federal and regional governments and businesses are not in good position to solving the linguistic issues in Belgium. The responsibility might rest on the people, especially the youth. Therefore, understand deep down inside their thoughts might be much easier by face to face interviews instead of questionnaire. However, the combination of both quantitative and qualitative methods might still be considered as each method might help me critically understand the respondents in many different ways. While I can quickly and easily gather answers from hundreds or thousands of people as I did in term1, the time and budget constraints remain critical for my qualitative research. Figuring out the right sample size for my qualitative research must be considered carefully to ensure my sample size is representative enough and my research remains realisable and unbiased.