

## Minorités linguistiques et société Linguistic Minorities and Society



# Being a Francophone Parent with Children in Dutch-medium Education in Brussels A Tale of Tensions and Competing Discourses

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Numéro 7, 2016

Diversité, frontières ethnolinguistiques et éducation au Québec et au Canada

Diversity, Ethnolinguistic Boundaries, and Education in Québec and Canada

URI : <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1036422ar>

DOI : <https://doi.org/10.7202/1036422ar>

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Éditeur(s)

Institut canadien de recherche sur les minorités linguistiques / Canadian Institute for Research on Linguistic Minorities

ISSN

1927-8632 (numérique)

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Citer cet article

Van Mensel, L. (2016). Being a Francophone Parent with Children in Dutch-medium Education in Brussels: A Tale of Tensions and Competing Discourses. *Minorités linguistiques et société / Linguistic Minorities and Society*, (7), 195–211. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1036422ar>

Résumé de l'article

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## Being a Francophone Parent with Children in Dutch-medium Education in Brussels: a Tale of Tensions and Competing Discourses

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### Abstract

In the officially bilingual (French–Dutch) Brussels Capital Region (Belgium), education is largely organized in two parallel but separate systems: French-medium education and Dutch-medium education. Parents must choose to send their children to either a Dutch- or a French-medium school. The choice of one education system over another may generate identity-related issues, such as the idea—rooted in nationalism—that “being a French speaker” and “sending your children to Dutch-medium education” are identity options that are by definition conflicting. In this article, I present a case study of a Francophone couple who decided to enroll their children in a Dutch-medium school in Brussels. Even if this decision brought the parents closer to Dutch-speaking social networks, it also highlighted the tensions and contradictions between the various identity options available. The study shows how these parents, in trying to deal with these tensions, appeal to quite different and sometimes contradictory discourse on language and belonging.

### Résumé

Dans la région officiellement bilingue (français–néerlandais) de Bruxelles Capitale (Belgique), l'éducation est organisée en deux systèmes parallèles mais distincts (francophone–néerlandophone). Les parents doivent choisir d'inscrire leurs enfants dans l'un ou l'autre de ces systèmes d'éducation. Ce choix peut générer des questions liées à l'identité, comme l'idée – enracinée dans le nationalisme – qu'« être un locuteur français » et « d'inscrire ses enfants à un enseignement dispensé en néerlandais » sont des options d'identité qui sont par définition incompatibles. Dans cet article, je présente le cas d'un couple francophone qui a décidé d'inscrire ses enfants dans une école néerlandophone. Même si cette décision a rapproché les parents des réseaux sociaux néerlandophones, elle a également mis en relief les tensions entre les diverses options d'identité linguistique disponibles. L'étude montre comment ces parents, en tentant de faire face à ces tensions, font appel à des discours assez différents et parfois contradictoires sur la langue et l'appartenance.

Like many other cities, Brussels is faced with a growing and ever more heterogeneous population in terms of cultural and linguistic background. Deboosere et al., (2009) estimate that the Brussels population will increase by approximately 20% by 2050 (rising up to 1.2 million inhabitants) and from the comprehensive language survey studies by Janssens (2001, 2007, 2013), we know that the population is becoming increasingly multilingual. This growing heterogeneity clearly constitutes a challenge to the existing political and institutional structures, which are built upon modernist notions of “national” citizenship that tend to favor monolingual and monocultural practices and beliefs.

Indeed, in the officially bilingual (French–Dutch) Region of Brussels Capital, so-called “person-related” matters are not governed by the Region but are divided between the Flemish Community and the French Community. This means that much of administrative life in Brussels is organized in terms of two parallel language-based structures, one Dutch-speaking and the other French-speaking. Citizens are free to choose to which “language group” they wish to adhere, but they have to choose between one or the other, when applying for an ID card for instance.<sup>1</sup> This administrative separation of the population into one or the other language community reflects the political composition of Belgium, with two officially monolingual regions making up the largest part of the country<sup>2</sup> and separate electoral lists and political parties for the officially Dutch-speaking Flanders in the north and the officially French-speaking Wallonia in the south.

In Brussels, the institutional enshrinement of the dichotomy “French-speaking versus Dutch-speaking” is also reflected in the educational system. Rather than offering some type of bi- or multilingual education, Brussels has (with some exceptions) two parallel education systems, Dutch-medium education and French-medium education. Both depend on a different administrative body, the Flemish Community and the French Community respectively, and as such they differ not only in the language of instruction (Dutch or French), but also in terms of the financial resources available to the schools, the curriculum or to a certain extent the content of the classes and the materials used. The organization of education in Brussels is thus based on a monocultural model (see also De Schutter, 2002), which contrasts strongly with the cultural and linguistic heterogeneity that characterizes the city’s, as well as the schools’, population.

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1. This can mean that the language of the ID card (the “official status”) is not necessarily a reflection of the holder’s most commonly used language(s).
  2. *The Belgian Constitution*. Belgian House of Representatives. “Article 3: Belgium comprises three Regions: the Flemish Region, the Walloon Region and the Brussels Region. Article 4: Belgium comprises four linguistic regions: the Dutch-speaking region, the French-speaking region, the bilingual region of Brussels-Capital and the German-speaking region.” URL: [http://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/pdf\\_sections/publications/constitution/GrondwetUK.pdf](http://www.lachambre.be/kvvcr/pdf_sections/publications/constitution/GrondwetUK.pdf) (Last accessed: 16 July 2014)

A consequence of the institutionalized division into parallel French–Dutch structures is that the choice for one education system or another may generate identity-related issues for the actors involved. Opting for a Dutch-medium school implies not opting for a French-medium school and vice versa, and this, within the Belgian context, can easily be interpreted politically. One example of such a political reading would be the idea that “being a French speaker” and “sending your children to Dutch-medium education” are by definition conflicting identity options, in the sense that it involves crossing a boundary between language communities, and these language communities are regarded by many as essential to the definition of one’s identity in Belgium. As Blommaert (2011) argues, popular and media representations (and, to some extent, research) typically highlight the ethnolinguistic opposition between Dutch-speaking Flemings and French-speaking Walloons as fundamental to Belgian political dynamics (see also Sinardet, 2012, 2013).<sup>3</sup>

In the present contribution, my aim is to illustrate how a Francophone couple, parents of children in Dutch-medium education deal with such identity issues. Based on interview data, I will explore the discourses they present in an attempt to overcome/bypass the alleged incongruence/incompatibility of being a Francophone with children in Dutch-medium education. But first I will briefly discuss the historical background of the linguistic situation in Brussels, in order to provide a better understanding of how the present situation has come about and to show which are the (political) stakes involved. I will equally give some more information on Dutch-medium education in Brussels as well as on previous research dealing with identity issues of parents in Dutch-medium education.

## Background

Because of its high socio-cultural status, French played a dominant role in Brussels for a long time. The Dutch language was associated with Flanders, a rural and poor region in the nineteenth century, in contrast to a wealthy, industrial French-speaking Wallonia. Consequently, the Dutch language was considered culturally limited and irreconcilable with social upward mobility (Willemyns, 2003). The socioeconomic and cultural prestige of French progressively led to a “Frenchification” of the city—with, for instance, many Dutch-speaking parents sending their children to school in French—and to a “minorization” of the Dutch-speaking population in the capital (Witte & Van Velthoven, 1998; Treffers-Daller, 2002; Willemyns, 2003). It is against this historical background that we should situate the origins of the present two-tier organizational model. Indeed, the so-called “Brussels” model’ (Witte, Alen, & Dumont, 1999), negotiated in the 1960s and 1970s, was

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3. Note that Blommaert (2011) challenges this view, and suggests instead that what characterizes the sociolinguistic situation in Belgium is an ongoing language-ideological debate between a homogenizing monolingual stand on the one hand and a bilingual one on the other. Therefore, according to Blommaert (2011), the real ‘language problems’ in Belgium are the denial of bilingualism and the resulting denial of diversity.

the result of a desire to ensure political representation and protection of the Dutch-language minority in Brussels.

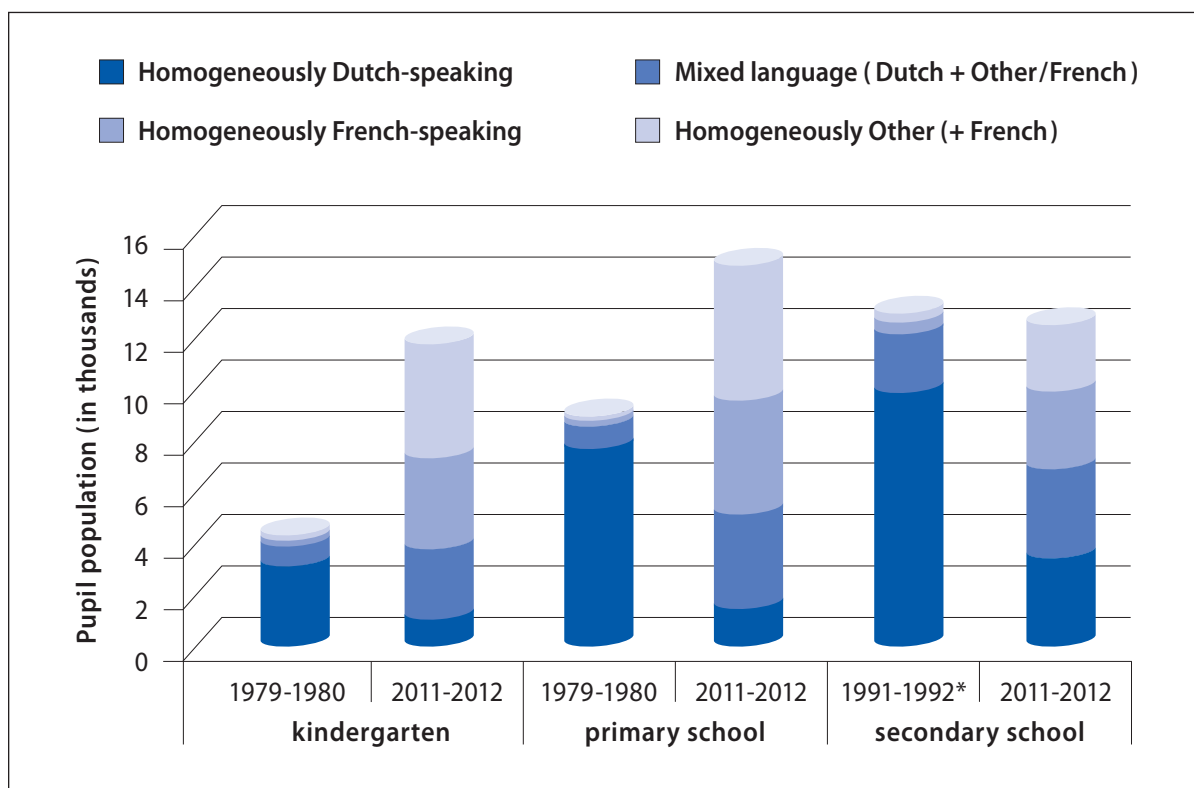
These days, however, the picture of Dutch speakers as a minority should be qualified. Economic development in the last decades of the twentieth century has led to the growing importance of the Dutch-speaking region of Flanders and, as a corollary, to the growing prestige of the Dutch language in Belgium as a whole. Dutch speakers may be a numerical minority in Brussels, but in terms of prestige they could equally be regarded a majority (see also Hambye, 2009). So, for instance, competence in Dutch is valued highly in the job market (in combination with French and English, see Mettewie & Van Mensel, 2009).

The resurgence of Dutch is certainly one of the factors that has contributed to the growing success of Dutch-medium education. At the end of the 1970s, the establishment of Dutch-medium education was set up as a means of maintaining a Dutch-speaking presence in the largely French-speaking city (Deprez, Persoons, Streulens, & Wijnants, 1982; Witte & Van Velthoven, 1998; Mettewie, 2007; cf. language maintenance education, Baker, 2006). At this time, many were predicting the imminent demise of Dutch-medium schools due to the perceived complete “Frenchification” of the Dutch-speaking minority in Brussels. Shortly after its establishment, however, it transpired that it was actually the presence of “non-target group” children (i.e. children who do not have Dutch as a home language) which contributed to the success of these schools. In fact, from this moment onwards, the number of pupils attending Dutch-medium schools in Brussels has never ceased to increase, leading to the present situation where most registered pupils speak other languages than Dutch at home with their parents.

The figures in figure 1, based on estimates collected by the representative body of the Flemish government in Brussels (*Vlaamse Gemeenschapscommissie* [VGC]) from the schools’ principals, clearly illustrate the aforementioned evolution. In three decades, the total number of pupils in primary school and kindergarten in particular has grown exponentially. The proportion of children from Dutch-speaking families is now a mere 10% (in secondary school 30%), and over a third of the children speak an immigrant language (partly in combination with French) at home (in secondary school 20%).

The situation of parents voluntarily opting to educate their children in a language that was not the family’s first language drew the attention of researchers. The first study focusing on the parents and their motivations was conducted by Deprez et al. (1982). In this study, it was observed that “Belgian” French-speaking parents described their choice for Dutch-medium education as a difficult one, partly because they frequently met with objections from family and friends who intimated that they were siding with the “Flemish”—and

**Figure 1**  
**Dutch-medium education in Brussels:**  
**evolution of pupil population according to reported language background**



Source: VGC (2013)\*

\* We reproduced the categories used by the VGC to describe the language background verbatim, even if some of them appear to be incoherent. Source: <http://www.vgc.be/Onderwijs/Onderwijsbeleid+van+de+VGC/Over+het+Brussels+Nederlandstalig+onderwijs/cijfers.htm> (Last accessed: July 1, 2014). It must be added that some caution is warranted regarding the accuracy of the figures, as they are based on the school principals' interpretation of the parents' statements on their home language(s) at the time of their child's enrollment. Moreover, the broad language categories used are not unproblematic either, but in any case, the figures are testimony to the undeniable sea change in the pupil population of Dutch-medium education.

their political agenda—by opting for a Dutch-medium school. Likewise, “foreign” parents<sup>4</sup> mentioned that they had received comments from “Belgian” French-speakers regarding their choice of a Dutch-medium school for their children. These included warnings that these schools would make their children feel estranged from their own families, observations that the Dutch language was useless, and assertions that the “*culture française*” was infinitely richer (Deprez et al., 1982). Similar issues were explicitly referenced in a quantitative study conducted 25 years later (Van Mensel, 2007), which showed that French-speaking families

4. The term used in the original article was *vreemde gezinnen*. This article shows its age through its use of terminology that would now no longer be considered politically correct. The compound *vreemde gezinnen*, for instance, could also be translated as “strange” or “alien” families. Similarly, a term like *gastarbeider* (guest worker), used in the same article, is no longer deemed acceptable.



with a Belgian background were frequently preoccupied with how their children's presence in the schools—as well as their own—was being perceived by Dutch speakers. Similarly, the study revealed that French speakers expected their children to benefit from going to a Dutch-medium school in terms of “feeling at ease” among Dutch speakers, more so than parents from immigrant backgrounds did.

In sum, in previous research on parents in Dutch-medium education, the Belgian political issue emerged as an issue of parental concern, as did the relationship between Dutch and French speakers (in the school and beyond). In line with the dichotomy marking Belgian politics and media,<sup>5</sup> these issues seem to be informed by the underlying assumption that speaking French at home and sending children to Dutch-medium education can potentially be read as a political act. However, how these issues are dealt with from an insider perspective remained to be investigated. In the present contribution I will discuss interview data from one particular case, namely a “*Francophone Brusselois*” couple whom I have called Béatrice and Alain. The data are drawn from a larger corpus that served as material for a multiple case study on parents with children in Dutch-medium education in Brussels (Van Mensel, 2014). By adopting a social rather than a linguistic approach to multilingualism (see also Heller, 2007), the purpose of the study was to unveil the complexities underlying the ways in which these parents deal with language-related identity issues through a privileging of their “insider” perspectives.

The excerpts I will discuss are drawn from four open-ended interviews that were conducted with Alain and Béatrice (in French) in September and December 2010. The conversations took place in the participants' home and in a local bar. The data were recorded using digital audio recorders and subsequently transcribed into interactional texts (Silverstein, 1992), which served as the actual materials of analysis. I then adopted a qualitative discourse analysis in order to uncover recurrent motifs in the participants' stories and focus on the themes that were important to them (thematic analysis, see e.g. Pavlenko, 2007; Talmy, 2010; Duff, 2012).

### **Francophone Brusselois in Dutch-medium education in Brussels: the case of Alain and Béatrice**

Alain (38) and Béatrice (40) were both born and raised in Brussels in a largely French-speaking environment. At the time of the interviews, they had two children: a daughter (7), who is in her first year of primary school, and a son (4.5) in the second year of

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5. Interestingly, even if both the Dutch- and French-speaking media discuss issues related to education in Brussels—a typical example would be the annual reports on the number of parents who could not enroll their child in the school of their choice due to a shortage of places, in general the presence as such of French-speaking parents in Dutch-medium education is by now accepted, or at least not mentioned as an anomaly in the press.

kindergarten. Béatrice is the Belgian vice-director of an internationally renowned French publishing house and Alain works as a collaborator on a university research project related to ecological issues. In terms of socio-economic background, they can be seen as belonging to the highly educated middle-class. According to Alain and Béatrice, they “accidentally” ended up sending their children to a Dutch-medium school (see also below). For practical and ecological reasons, they wanted a nursery nearby, and the Dutch-speaking nursery in the neighborhood happened to leave a far better impression on them than the Francophone one.<sup>6</sup> Their desire for their daughter to remain among her friends and the quality of education she had thus far received, led them to continue their children’s trajectory in Dutch-medium education.

From the perspective of the official and institutional dual organization of Brussels, Alain and Béatrice represent the typical ‘other’ category in Dutch-medium education in Brussels; raised in one of the traditional language communities, they have chosen to cross a frontier and are present in an institution that represents the other traditional language community. In this context, they are labeled and/or categorized as *Francophones*. Their trajectory (current language use, family language background, and schooling) displays largely French language practices, which provide grounds for such a classification. Having children in Dutch-medium education, however, has influenced their social networks to some extent, as they have come in contact with Dutch-speaking caretakers, parents, and children, and have built close friendships with some of the parents in their children’s school as a result.

With respect to Béatrice’s language background, there is one more element that deserves mentioning. Whereas her father and grandparents on her father’s side are said to be monolingual French-speakers, her mother and grandmother are what she calls “bilingual Brusselers”, who “would start their sentences in French and complete them in Dutch.” Although Béatrice’s knowledge of Dutch is in fact fairly limited, she does state that she sometimes inserts “Flemish” words in her language, calling it her “Brussels side”, thus claiming to some extent the same pedigree for herself. We cannot discuss the issue in detail here (for more information, see Van Mensel, 2014), but suffice it to say that Béatrice’s identification with this type of ‘mixed’ language behavior is one of the arguments she forwards to legitimate her claim to a mixed identity (see below).

During the interviews, both Alain and Béatrice addressed the issue of being Francophones while having their children attend a Dutch-medium school, but each of them did so by presenting a different type of discourse. Whereas Alain claims a “neutral” stance, Béatrice

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6. This aligns with the general perception of the superior quality of Dutch-medium schools in Brussels (Van Mensel, 2007; Janssens, 2013). Although it is hard to confirm or disconfirm this general impression due to internal variation among the schools, Dutch-medium education in Brussels is indeed supported by considerably more important financial resources, resulting (in general) in smaller groups and better facilities than French-medium education.



on her part employs a discourse of hybridity or mixedness in what we interpret as an effort to transcend the presupposed opposition by encapsulating both identity options. In what follows, I will present these discourses individually<sup>7</sup>, while paying attention to the tensions and incongruities that arise.

### ***Alain's discourse of neutrality***

Alain's initial neutral stance toward the 'Belgian issue' is explicitly mentioned in the following excerpt:

#### **Excerpt 1: Alain**

Je détestais l'idée de m'identifier à une communauté juste parce qu'elle parlait/euh/parce que je parlais la même langue/et là ((after being tagged a Francophone radical, see below)) je me suis senti francophone en fait. (I hated the idea of identifying with a community just because it spoke/euh/because I spoke the same language/and at that moment ((after being tagged a Francophone radical, see below)) I felt Francophone actually).

Alain's assertion in the excerpt above (excerpt 1) is a rather explicit ideological statement against a classification in terms of language, and against linking language and community more generally. In principle, he does not want to identify (nor be identified) with a group or a community simply because of a common language, and states that he "hates" the mere idea of it. In the course of the interview, at numerous points he also explicitly takes distance from the category *francophone* (with the connotations this entails within the Belgian context), as illustrated in the following excerpts:

#### **Excerpt 2: Alain**

Tout ça et d'ailleurs je me suis engueulé avec assez de francophones sur le sujet. (All that and by the way I've had arguments with a lot of Francophones on the subject).

#### **Excerpt 3: Alain**

Je me suis souvent disputé avec des francophones qui disaient/les flamands sont tous fachos/c'est la loi du plus fort/machin xx/et je dis/ben non/il y a/et j'essaie d'expliquer le point de vue. (I've often argued with Francophones who said/all Flemish are fascists/it's the law of the strongest/and stuff xx/and I say/well no/there's/and I try to explain the point of view).

7. The following conventions were used when transcribing the recorded data:

((**words**)) = Double parentheses enclose transcriber's comments.

<**laugh**> = Angle brackets enclose descriptions of vocal noises (e.g. laughter, chuckle, inhale) or other noises on the recording that are relevant for the analysis (e.g. hands clapping).

xx = x's indicate strings of talk for which no hearing could be achieved.

? = A question mark indicates a relatively strong rising intonation (interrogative).

! = An exclamation mark indicates rising intonation (exclamatory).

.. = Dots indicate silence (more dots indicate a longer silence).

In these excerpts, Alain uses the label *Francophone* himself, and he does so to refer to certain groups of people (presumably friends and/or family) from which he distances himself, taking up a position that separates him from French-speaking people who do assign people to a certain community based on the language that they speak.<sup>8</sup> Alain's preferred "neutral" stance, however, is challenged from different sides, and this challenge seems to have emerged as a consequence of having sent his children to Dutch-medium education. For instance, some of their friends and family allegedly accused Alain and Béatrice of educating their children as "flamingants" (Flemish nationalists). At the same time, one of Alain's Dutch-speaking friends accused Alain during a discussion that he was reasoning like the *FDF* (*Front des Francophones*—a political party whose main objective is to champion the interests of the *Francophones* in and around Brussels). In both cases, rather radical positions based on a language-based societal distinction were invoked in order to make a point. It appears that Alain cannot escape a categorization by others as *Francophone* (an imposed identity), and having children in a Dutch-medium school apparently places him right at the juncture between the two sides in the discourse on the "Belgian issue". The apparent inevitability of a political opposition based on 'language-based' categories upsets Alain, particularly when it is expressed by a friend, in this case a Dutch-speaking friend. As can be seen in the following excerpt, it even causes him to respond emotionally:

#### Excerpt 4: Alain

J'étais vraiment/hm/autant avec mes copains francophones quand on, quand on a des euhm/ou ma famille/quand je défends la position flamande je m'énerve/autant là ((he refers to being tagged a Francophone radical)) j'étais triste/enfin/je me suis dit/j'avais un peu euhm ... peut paraître-/s- ça peut paraître débile hè/mais le-/je disais avec Béatrice le lendemain .. là on essaie tellement de pas rentrer dans ces/dans ces/euhm/cette bagarre/ces disputes et tout/et on est avec des supercopains/et euhm/. et .. et ... enfin, c-c'est un peu un peu bête de dire ça mais mon/mon sentiment c'était peut-être/même eux/enfin. (I was really/hm/while with my Francophone friends when we . when we have euhm/or my family/when I defend the Flemish position I get worked up/well then ((he refers to being tagged a Francophone radical)) I was sad/anyway/I said to myself/I was a bit euhm ... might see-/i- it might seem stupid right/but the-/I said to Béatrice the day after .. we try so hard not to get into these/into these/euhm/yeah this brawl/these quarrels and all yeah/and we are with great friends/and euhm/. and .. and . anyway i- it's a bit stupid to say this but my/my feeling was maybe/even them/anyway).

The fact that Alain is claimed by his Dutch-speaking friend to reason like a Francophone radical saddens him rather than annoys him, because, as much as he "tries hard to stay out of

8. The reference to the Flemish as "*fachos*", as such quite a strong statement, perhaps requires some explanation. In French, the adjective "*facho*" is used as a colloquial abbreviation of "fascist" with a contemporary interpretation of an advocate or follower of the political extreme right. Without getting into too many historical details, to call the Flemish "fascists" in the Belgian context alludes to the collaboration of certain Flemish political factions with the Nazis during WWII, and, more recently, to the electoral success of certain nationalist right-wing parties in Flanders.

these quarrels”, “*même eux*” (even *them*), his “*super copains*”, push him into a position he does not wish to be in. This may seem unfair to him seeing that in interaction with Francophones he actually finds himself defending the Flemish point of view (“*position flamande*”), which could be considered ironic (even more so in the light of his professed desire to stay out of the political quarrels altogether).

However, Alain recognizes that he responded to his friend’s “accusation” by feeling Francophone, as he states in excerpt 1. In a defensive reaction, Alain thus acknowledges the imposed category. His access to Dutch-speaking social networks actually makes it harder for him to maintain a “neutral” position, and harder to avoid being identified or identifying with a certain group or community “just because they speak the same language”. The difference in emotional reaction vis-à-vis members of the “French-speaking group” (upset) and the “Dutch-speaking group” (sad) seems to indicate that Alain indeed distinguishes between both groups, either explicitly or implicitly.

### ***Béatrice’s discourse of mixedness: Belgitude***

Béatrice, on her part, invokes what she calls her “*belgitude*”, a concept which is not meant to refer to her Belgian nationality as such, but apparently enables her to avoid identifying with the more overtly ethnic identities of “Flemish” and “Walloon”:<sup>9</sup>

#### **Excerpt 5: Béatrice**

Mais/mais donc tu vois/moi je me sens pas du tout euh/c’est pour ça que moi je revendique beaucoup ma belgitude/tu vois <laugh> et que ça me/la situation actuelle me ... m’horripile euh .. pour plein de raisons autres mais le fait/si la Belgique devait se séparer/pour toutes les raisons qu’on connaît/bon pourquoi pas/c’est comme ça mais moi/je serais vraiment handicapée quoi/parce que <laugh> je ne me sens pas euh ... ni flamande ni wallonne/tu vois? et donc/être séparée d’un morceau/c’est comme si tu me tirais en deux quoi/tu vois? donc ça me gêne vraiment beaucoup <laugh>. (But, but so you see/ I don’t feel at all euh/that’s why I assert my belgitude a lot/you see <laugh> and why I/why the current situation ... gives me the creeps euh ... for other reasons as well but the fact/if Belgium were to split/because of all the reasons that we know/well why not/it’s one of those things/but me/I would be really disabled/because <laugh> I don’t feel euh .. neither Flemish nor Walloon/you see? and so/ being separated from a piece/it’s like you would tear me in two/you see? so it really annoys me <laugh>).

9. The concept of *belgitude* was first coined by Mertens and Javeau (1976) and was in origin mainly used to distinguish Belgian French-speaking literature from French literature. The term refers to Senghor’s notion of *négritude*, which highlighted the common African background of black writers and intellectuals and revoked the French cultural colonialism (particularly in the 1930s). More generally, *Belgitude* thus proposes an identity that focuses on the aspects that Belgians have in common.

Béatrice states that she feels neither Flemish nor Walloon, and therefore the break-up of Belgium would leave her feeling disabled. Further on in the conversation, Béatrice asserts her adherence to ‘being Belgian’ once more, and paradoxically uses it to position herself *vis-à-vis* “the Flemish”, who according to her rarely display such a sense of belonging toward Belgium.

#### Excerpt 6: Béatrice

Béatrice : oui/mais moi je me sens belge par contre/parce que rarement/euh/les flamands se sentent/il n’y a pas de ce sentiment-là/oui/mais moi je me sens belge et je le revendique en plus/tu vois? Mais un belge avec des flamands et des wallons/tu vois? INT : tu es vraiment une des dernières <laugh> Béatrice : oui/une des dernières. INT : je suis désolé/moi belge/euh. Béatrice : Des derniers bastions ah si/moi je suis super fière de ce côté euh. INT : ah oui/mais fière? Béatrice : que de ce côté xx/ah oui/je te jure/mais je sais que c’est très rare chez des flamands de trouver ça (Béatrice: yes/but I I feel Belgian on the contrary/because rarely/euh/the Flemish feel/there’s no such feeling/yes/but I I feel Belgian and I’m sure to assert it/you see? but a Belgian with Flemings and Walloons/you see? INT: you are really one of the last ones <laugh>. Béatrice: yes/one of the last ones. INT: I’m sorry/me Belgian euh/euh. Béatrice: the last bastions/ah yes/I am really proud of that part euh. INT: ah yes/but proud? Béatrice: that/of that part xx/ah yes I swear /but I know it’s very unusual to find among Flemings.)

Interestingly, Béatrice claims a *Belgianness* that is, according to her, “unusual to find among Flemings”. The idea of Belgium, which in institutional and geographical terms can be regarded as an umbrella term for a number of communities, and which is evoked as such by Béatrice (“but Belgian with Flemish and Walloons”), becomes an ideological stance that is considered more typical for members of one group than for the other. There is an interesting paradox here, in that Béatrice professes to hold an encompassing view of both groups. Yet, at the same time, she actually associates this view to only one of these two groups, i.e. the *Francophones*, and not the other, i.e. the Flemish. This suggests that she takes for granted the existence of both groups, and that they are opposed to each other. Contrary to what her *belgitude* would imply, Béatrice in fact positions herself as very much different from the “Flemings”.

In the following excerpt, Béatrice elaborates on the same issues:

#### Excerpt 7: Béatrice

Ah ouais, ouais, ouais/moi je suis super fière parce que/comme je suis entourée de gens qui sont vraiment anti-flamands/enfin/il y en a plein/hein/autour de nous qui sont comme ça/moi/je me dis/et à la limite je, je/avant de mettre les enfants à l’école/j’étais même dans cet esprit-là aussi/honnêtement/parce que ça me cassait les pieds tous ces trucs/et ça, ça m’a vraiment adouci quoi/parce que tu les rencontres/tu discutes et tout ça/et tu te dis/eh oh/c’est de la politique/c’est pas les gens hein <laugh> enfin/tu vois ... tu te rends compte que .. c’est

débile d'être comme ça quoi / donc moi ça me ... moi je suis super contente de faire ça parce que justement ça m'assagit / ça permet de mettre un peu les gens entre / oh calmez-vous / les uns et les autres on se calme / tu vois / de mettre un peu / un peu de / et donc / ça ferait vraiment / ça me casserait les pieds de plus pouvoir faire ça / et de me retrouver euh / de l'autre côté d'une barrière ou d'une frontière / ça me casserait vraiment les pieds / quoi.

(Ah yeah, yeah, yeah / I am really proud because / as I am surrounded by people who are really anti-Flemish / well / there are many / right / around us that are like that / I say to myself / and at a push I I / before putting the children in the school / I was even in that state of mind as well / to be honest / because it annoyed me all that stuff / and it, it really softened me / because you meet them / you talk and all that / and you say to yourself / well ey / it's politics / it's not the people right <laugh> anyway / you see ... you realize that .. it's stupid to be like that right / so to me it .. I'm really happy to do it ((children in Dutch-medium education)) precisely because it softens me / it allows to put people a little between / oh calm down / let's all calm down / you see / to put a bit / a bit of / and so / it would really / it would annoy me not to be able to do that anymore / and to find myself euh / on the other side of a barrier or a border / that would really annoy the hell out of me).

In this excerpt, Béatrice explains how deciding to send her children to Dutch-medium education has “softened” her point of view regarding the opposition between the Flemish and the Francophones, which leads her to make a distinction between politics and people (“*c'est de la politique, c'est pas les gens*”). She states that she is proud of her decision to send her children to a Dutch-speaking school, likes to challenge people in her entourage that hold anti-Flemish opinions, and is happy to be able to counter them. This way, she celebrates a certain hybridity, a being on both sides—in line with her professed *belgitude*. The idea of having to choose between one or the other, or to find herself on one side of a barrier or boundary, would therefore annoy her very much, cf. the expression “*ça me casserait vraiment les pieds*” (‘that would really annoy the hell out of me’).

## Discussion

As much as Alain and Béatrice would like to move beyond the opposition *francophone* versus *flamand*, in practice such a position is not easy to maintain. Many people around them do categorize them in these terms and remind them of their *being Francophone*. Their own thinking in these matters appears to be much more polarized than they would claim at first. Béatrice’s notion of *belgitude* explicitly aims at transcending the opposition *francophones-flamands*; however, this does not prevent her from distinguishing herself from the *Flemish*, paradoxically on the basis of the very concept of *belgitude*. Alain’s attitude toward the labels under scrutiny is at least as ambiguous. On the one hand, he professes to refuse the label *francophone* when it is applied to himself, based on his rejection of any identification with a community on the mere basis of language use; on the other hand, he freely uses these labels throughout his account and tries to avoid the obvious label *francophone*, not



by transcending the opposition, but by expressing a positive attitude toward the opposite label *flamand*. Not unexpectedly, this paradoxical strategy is not entirely successful: Alain himself narrates negative reactions toward his attitude from both his *Francophone* family and a *Flemish* friend, which in one case leads him to eventually embrace the label *francophone*, albeit reluctantly. All in all, even if having children in Dutch-medium education has definitely brought Béatrice and Alain closer to Dutch-speaking social networks and has changed their way of thinking, it has also brought out the contradictions and tensions that occur between various identity options. Those contradictions are not easily resolved and, particularly in the case of Alain, give rise to an emotional account of conflicting affiliations.

More generally, we could say that both Alain and Béatrice's discourses can be regarded as 'narratives' that provide a legitimizing and (to them) meaningful framework which can reconcile their situation as *Francophones* in Dutch-medium education. Béatrice's claim to a *mixed*, Brussels' identity (defined as a "being of both"), as well as her proclaimed *belgitude*, for instance, offers a notion of a coherent self that can also be projected onto the children, for it provides a framework that combines the Francophone background of the family with having the children in Dutch-medium education. As such, it may also be considered a 'bulwark' to counter external comments and/or pressure. In this context, it is useful to mention the following statement formulated by Heller over a decade ago:

The celebration of "fusion" and "hybridity" may simply be a way of legitimating what are actually multiple monolingualisms, and the privileged position of those with the right kind of multilingual repertoires. It may also signal a struggle between two elites, one with an investment in monolingualism, the other with an investment in multilingualism. (Heller, 2000, p. 23)

Particularly the last part of the quote applies to what we have observed in Béatrice and Alain's accounts. The urge on their part to defend their educational choice—by calling upon certain discourses and images of selfhood, whether of the "neutral" or the "encapsulating" type—*vis-à-vis* more or less explicit "attacks" from people in their own socio-economic environment would indeed indicate such a struggle. But the emphasis on hybridity is certainly not new or restricted to the case of Béatrice and Alain.

In fact, these parents' stories can be seen as examples of widespread discourses on language and identity that emerged in the last decades. Heller & Duchêne (2012) suggest that such discourses are increasingly characterized by two tropes, 'pride' and 'profit', which are said to be co-constitutive and inextricably linked (Heller & Bell, 2012). Béatrice's statement of how proud she is (excerpt 7: "*je suis super fière*") of having enrolled her children in a Dutch-medium school literally aligns with this idea, as does her comment about being "proud" of her "Belgian side" in excerpt 6. With regard to profit, we can easily imagine the possible gains that this family may expect from their educational choice. These parents, highly educated middle class people, are obviously aware of the social benefits that



knowledge of Dutch may grant their children in the Brussels' context. These "economic" issues, however, are never explicitly touched upon and are in a way conspicuous by their absence. One example is these parents' suggestion that they "accidentally" ended up enrolling their children in Dutch-medium education, as if without any deliberate consideration, a possibility that is highly improbable given the sociolinguistic and educational situation in Brussels.

## Conclusions

In Brussels, the existing educational system is faced with a growing and increasingly diversified pupil population in terms of (linguistic) background (cf. also superdiversity, Vertovec, 2007). In contrast, its education is still largely grounded in a (poly-) monolingual and monocultural model that draws its existence from "traditional" and historically grown language communities which are furthermore considered as competing (i.e. the Dutch-speaking and the French-speaking communities). Taking into account these changing contexts, it is hardly surprising to find tensions occurring at several levels; between discourses that support the existing two-tier language-based community organization, and discourses that provide alternative views, and between nationalist notions of identity (where language is regarded as a prime identifier for identity) on the one hand and notions of identity that embrace or reflect the pluricultural and plurilingual nature of the city's shifting population.

Bearing this in mind, the purpose of this contribution was to look at how the notion of being Francophone and having children in Dutch-medium education in Brussels is dealt with by the actors themselves. I therefore focused on the stories of one French-speaking couple, Alain and Béatrice, who, as we have seen, produce quite a different take on the matter. Alain prefers to disconnect language and identity completely, whereas Béatrice proposes a hybridity that embraces various identity options. Within the Belgian context, these views can be interpreted as possible alternatives to the institutionalized discourses that underlie and support the existing two-tier language community based organization. However, we have also seen how these views are either difficult to maintain (as is the case of Alain) or even inherently contradictory (in the case of Béatrice), resulting in a much more complex picture. What the data show—and perhaps this is where we can extrapolate the current findings to other contexts—is that tensions and contradictions between possible identity options are in fact inherent to the participants' narratives and as such very much a part of how they deal with issues of identity and language. In this sense, language conflict (Nelde, 1997) appears not to be only a matter of opposing groups or communities, as the prevailing political and media discourse would suggest; rather, it can also be conceived as a conflict between ideologies *within* individuals themselves, and as a conflict between discourses about language and identity that struggle for power/momentum in a rapidly-changing world.

### Acknowledgments

I would like to thank Julie Deconinck for helpful stylistic suggestions which have much improved this article. Thanks also to the anonymous reviewers as well as the editors of the special issue for their suggestions. Any remaining weaknesses are, however, entirely my responsibility.

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### **Keywords**

linguistic identity, parents, Belgium, discourse analysis, hybridity

### **Mots clés**

identité linguistique, parents, Belgique, analyse de discours, hybridité

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