

## **‘Crossovers’ in the Flemish education system: An exploratory study**

Official statistics produced by the Flemish Department of Education and Training show that in the past decade (2008-2017) the number of French-speaking (Walloon) students in the Dutch-speaking (Flemish) education system increased exponentially. At present, secondary education organized by the Flemish Community attracts 21% more Walloon youngsters than it did ten years ago. This rise is not merely confined to Brussels (Belgium’s only officially bilingual region) but can be witnessed in the entire Flemish territory. This means that these pupils have to cross language barriers since they find themselves in a unilingual education system that is exclusively tailored to the needs of the children of the (local) dominant language community (Housen et al. 2002; McAndrew 2013).

### **Historical evolution of linguistic politics in the Belgian education systems**

McAndrew (2013: 25) points out that the educational structures in Belgium are ‘the most complex of the cases discussed in [her] book. The large number of structures, both governmental and educational, is beyond compare’. After the first (1970) and the second (1980) State reforms, Belgium was divided administratively into three economy-based regions (Flanders, Wallonia and Brussels-Capital Region), as well as three language-based communities (Dutch, French and German-speaking). To complicate matters further, the education systems in Belgium are ‘founded on two pillars (secular and religious) and four levels of organizing authority (communities, provinces, municipalities, and civil society associations)’. And this is not taking the situation in Brussels into account, where the Flemish and the French Communities (and related education systems) exist side-by-side and compete with each other.

From the foundation of Belgium in 1830 until 1932, policies regarding the language of education were rather different (McAndrew 2013: 26). In Wallonia, everyone was taught in French, which contrasted with the situation in Flanders where the language of instruction was a matter of choice. This means that in the Dutch-speaking part of Belgium ‘French and Dutch schools coexisted’, though in practice French remained ‘the dominant language in both [Flemish and Walloon] school systems, which reflected the status of this language with the upper social classes and political elites of the two groups’.

All of this could have changed in 1932, when the principle of territoriality (which had already been adopted in 1921) was ratified with landmark laws that turned Flanders and Wallonia, at least theoretically, into unilingual regions. In addition, the law of 14 July 1932 provided for the use of Dutch in primary and secondary schools. As Van der Jeught (2017: 185) reminds us/has pointed out, ‘[u]ntil then it had been up to the *pater familias* to decide about the language of instruction’. However, this reform did not affect Catholic schools, which greatly dominated the education system in those days. Indeed, Catholic schools were very slow in changing their teaching practices and French kept its privileged position for quite some time. As a result, the coexistence of French and Dutch in Flanders was largely maintained (McAndrew 2013).

In the 1960s, the language issues between the Flemish and the Walloons resurfaced oncemore (McAndrew 2013; Van der Jeught 2017). The law of 30 July 1963 was an important milestone for language regulation concerning education in Belgium, because it prescribed where Dutch, French or German should be used as the language of instruction, based on the constitutional division of the state into four language regions (with the exception of some municipalities with

special language facilities near the language border or around Brussels): Flemish (Dutch), French, German and the officially bilingual Brussels-Capital Region.

Nowadays, the language situation in Belgium's schooling is quite unequivocal in the sense that pupils in Flanders and Wallonia study in Dutch or in French respectively. French is taught as a subject in Flanders, but in Wallonia Dutch (as a foreign language) is often optional. Of course, it is also 'possible to opt for a school of the other language' but 'to do so one has to cross language barriers' (McAndrew 2013: 27).

## **Terminology**

Non-native speakers who cross language boundaries in order to attend school are called 'crossovers' in the Canadian literature (McAndrew & Eid 2003; McGlynn et al. 2009). Originally, Rampton (1995) introduced the term '(language) crossing' to describe interethnic communication between immigrant youngsters in a British school context and to refer to 'crossing the borders' between languages such as Panjabi, Creole and Indian English by these children (Van Mensel 2007: 2). Canadian and Belgian researchers slightly adapted this notion and applied it to the 'crossing' of language boundaries between different language communities. The phenomenon has been studied widely by Canadian researchers, focusing on aspects such as identity (Magnan 2010; Pilote 2006) and education (McAndrew 2013).

In Belgium, and in particular in the case of Brussels, 'crossovers' have received ample attention in research, with an emphasis on their own (and also parental) motivations and attitudes (Mettewie 2004, 2007; Van Mensel 2014). Janssens (2008, 2014) examined the position of Dutch and the language use in the specific case of the Brussels region. Similarly, Babault & Puren (2005) conducted sociolinguistic research zooming in on the families of children crossing linguistic boundaries for schooling in the border region with France.

## **Mapping out the population of French-speaking 'crossovers' in Belgium**

The impact of inter-community 'crossing' of French-speaking students into primary and secondary schools in the Dutch-speaking area of Belgium *as a whole*, has not received much scholarly attention and represents a major lacuna in the current debate.

The first stage of this PhD project consisted of describing and mapping the increase of Walloon pupils in the Flemish education system, something which is as yet uncharted territory. To assess the significance and plot geographical range of this phenomenon, I retrieved data from the Flemish Department of Education and Training for a careful appraisal. During the next phase, I mapped the 'crossovers' in a quantitative and cartographical manner, deduced potential trends and identified hotspots and likely networks. I decided to visualize the absolute quantities on interactive (online) maps to facilitate the comparison and interpretation of the data. The results have been uploaded on a dedicated website ([www.crossoversinbelgium.com](http://www.crossoversinbelgium.com)), which is freely accessible to allow for the widest possible dissemination.

## **Some early results**

Analysis of the data so far indicates that in the past decade (2008-2017) the number of Walloon pupils in Flemish education increased by 7.8%. Overall, 9874 pupils turned out to be domiciled in Wallonia but attended school in Flanders. The most striking increase took place in secondary schools: the number of French-speaking youngsters attending school in Flanders since 2008

grew by no less than 21%. In comparison, the number of ‘crossovers’ in Flemish primary schools fluctuates, registering even a slight decrease of 1% when comparing 2008 with 2017.

These findings raise a number of new questions. Where do these French-speaking youngsters come from exactly and which places in Flanders do they tend to favour? Data show that in the year 2016-2017 most of the ‘crossovers’ in primary and secondary education in Flanders originate from the Walloon provinces of Hainaut (44%) and Walloon Brabant (41%). 12% of the pupils who cross the language borders come from Liège, and as the data indicate, they actually come from all over Wallonia because respectively 2% and 1% originate from Namur and Luxembourg. The majority of them are going to schools in Flemish Brabant (51%). West and East Flanders (18% and 15%) are clearly appealing to Walloon ‘crossovers’ as well. 8% of ‘crossovers’ pick a school in Limburg and 1% in Antwerp. Finally, education organized by the Flemish government in the Brussels region (6%) and the French Community (1%) (Comines-Warneton which is a municipality in Hainaut with language facilities for Dutch speakers) attract a limited number of Walloon pupils.

In addition, when analyzing the intake of Walloon youngsters in Flemish primary and secondary schools in the year 2016-2017, a possible trend reveals itself: most of these pupils come from municipalities adjacent to the linguistic border separating Wallonia and Flanders. In this respect, the following Walloon municipalities ‘send out’ most of the ‘crossovers’: Mouscron (Moeskroen), Tubize, Lessines, Enghien (Edingen), Comines-Warneton (Komen-Waasten), Grez-Doiceau, Braine l’Alleud, Mont-de-l’Enclus, Beauvechain and Jodoigne. As for the places on the receiving end of the intake, the same trend can be observed. The Flemish hotspots for schooling favoured by Walloon youngsters are (in this case for secondary education in 2016-2017): Halle, Leuven, Kortrijk, Geraardsbergen, Avelgem, Landen, Ronse, Tongeren, Hoegaarden and Tienen. These places too are situated (relatively) close to the language border.

The chosen method of data processing even allowed for an accurate representation of the extent to which each primary and secondary school in Flanders appeals to these ‘crossovers’. Some schools have to deal with very large amounts (up to 282) of French-speaking children in a Dutch-speaking educational context. More details about these findings can be found on the website (mentioned above).

## **Research questions and hypotheses**

Having completed the first stages of this research project, I now wish to concentrate on several closely related research questions, some of which are mentioned below:

- What is the sociolinguistic profile of the Walloon pupils in Flemish education? Is/are one or both parent(s) Dutch-speaking? Do they complete their entire school career in a Flemish environment or just a few/the last year(s)? What about higher education?
- What are the reasons behind the recent exponential increase of French-speaking students in Flemish schools?
- Why do these youngsters prefer crossing the language border to taking traditional foreign language courses or so-called language immersion schooling in Wallonia?
- Some of the primary and secondary schools in Flanders are having to deal with a large number of French-speaking pupils. How do school authorities, teachers, parents and pupils cope with and respond to such challenges?
- What are the precise motives of ‘crossovers’? Why do they pick certain cities/schools? Can we deduce certain trends or detect emerging networks?

- How do French-speaking youngsters look back upon (= retrospection) a school career in a Flemish environment?

Various hypotheses have been formulated in the secondary literature about the appeal of Flemish schools, such as the fact that they score significantly higher on PISA tests ('Programme for International Student Assessment', which evaluates education systems all over the world by testing 15-year-old-pupils) than Walloon schools. A second reason may be the increasing economic importance of Dutch, given that Flanders is economically the dominant region in Belgium. A third factor may have to do with the poor quality of Dutch language classes in Walloon schools (Mettewie 2004).

### Next steps

Now that I have gained insight into the quantitative and geographical range of this phenomenon, I would like to share our findings through our website and by giving PhD (poster) presentations. In this way, I hope to come into contact with the (European and especially Canadian) community of researchers who focus on bi-/multilingual speakers crossing linguistic boundaries, and to receive feedback on this research project.

One of the aims of my website is to keep the quantitative part of my study up-to-date. While waiting for the official numbers of the current year (2017-2018) to be made available, I will continue to analyze our current data and, given the project's social relevance, share it with the community at large, both within and outside academia.

Since the subject raises a multitude of far-reaching research questions, judicious choices will need to be made. One of the more pertinent and promising avenues to explore at this moment, would be to zoom in on the retrospective aspect by means of in-depth interviews with Walloons who have finished their schooling in a Flemish teaching establishment.

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