

Narrating Nationhood Without a Nation: Flemish Paradiplomacy and the Shaping of Identity

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Abstract:

This study examines how Flanders constructs and projects a distinct regional identity through its paradiplomatic relations. To explore this phenomenon, the paper adopts a poststructuralist discourse analysis, enabling an in-depth examination of how Flemish identity is articulated through language and strategically mobilised in diplomatic interactions. The study focuses on Flemish diplomats' speeches during official visits abroad, analysing both their lexicometric aspects and content. Through this analysis, the research identifies recurring themes and rhetorical strategies that shape the external projection of Flemish identity and influence the region's positioning in international relations. While Flemish paradiplomacy has been widely studied, little attention has been given to the specific characteristics of Flemish identity as conveyed in diplomatic narratives. Against this backdrop, this research provides new insights into how Flemish diplomats mobilise historical, linguistic, and cultural references to assert themselves as independent actors on the international stage, thereby reinforcing Flanders' legitimacy as a global player. The analysis reveals that Flemish diplomatic speeches prioritise different aspects of identity depending on the geopolitical context, with European delegations focusing on economic and political cooperation, while those outside Europe highlight cultural heritage and historical ties. By situating Flanders' case within broader discussions on regionalism, identity politics, and the evolving role of sub-state actors in diplomacy, this study contributes understanding how paradiplomacy functions not only as a political tool but also as a means of identity-building in a world where traditional state structures are increasingly contested.

Keywords: Flemish identity, paradiplomacy, discourse analysis

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Introduction

Flanders, as a federated entity within Belgium, has gained significant autonomy, especially in international matters, through the process of Belgian federalisation. This capacity is mainly due to the constitutional principle of *in foro interno, in foro externo*, allowing the Belgian regions to exercise their internal competencies on the international stage (Criekemans, 2006), a practice known as paradiplomacy. This development enables Flanders to represent its unique political, economic, and cultural interests independently, bypassing the central government in certain areas (Paquin, 2003).

Nonetheless, while Flanders is an active player in international relations, its identity remains a debated and complex concept. While the literature has documented the legal and institutional modalities of this external presence, few studies have focused on how Flanders discursively constructs its identity on the international stage, and the specific characteristics of Flemish identity remain underexplored. As Lequesne and Paquin (2017) point out, mainstream schools of thought in international relations largely neglect the diplomatic actions of subnational governments despite their increasing autonomy and capacity to act. In this context, understanding how Flanders constructs and projects this identity through its paradiplomatic activities is crucial, particularly in an international context where identity and political discourse are closely intertwined.

By analysing the discursive strategies of an entity such as Flanders, whose international presence is institutionally recognised but symbolically ambiguous, this article seeks to identify the characteristics of the Flemish identity projected onto the international stage are through the discourses of Flemish diplomats, by examining how Flanders defines and presents its identity on the global stage through its paradiplomatic efforts. To this aim, the article adopts a post-structuralist approach to analyse discourses based on both lexical trends and qualitative patterns.

The paper is divided into four sections. The first section presents the theoretical framework used, followed by a review of the Belgian institutional context and an exploration of the literature on the concepts of paradiplomacy, identity and the performative role of language. Then, the discourse analysis methodology is detailed, before moving on to the analysis itself. Finally, a comparative synthesis highlights the regularities and variations in the projection of Flemish identity according to the types of actors.

Institutional context: The Belgian state structure

The Belgian state is relatively recent, having been created in 1830 by the secession of French-speaking Belgium from the Netherlands. After Belgian independence, although they were in the majority, Dutch-speakers in Belgium enjoyed only a weak status within the new state (Dalle Mulle & Bieling, 2023). The tensions between French and Dutch speakers led to a division of political activity, resulting in Belgium transitioning from a unitary to a federal state that gradually granted more autonomy to the Communities and Regions (Izquierdo, 2014).

The federalisation process began in 1970 with the first State reform, establishing three communities competent in culture and language. This follows the demands of the Flemish people, who criticise the fact that everything within the State is managed in French (Deschouwer, 2009; Lagasse, 2001). The communities are responsible for international cultural cooperation. A second reform in 1980 created the Flemish and Walloon Regions, increasing regional powers, following a request from the Walloons (Bernard and al., 2020). The Brussels-Capital Region was only established later. Belgian federalism is described as “dissociation federalism” since the Communities and Regions have their own competencies governed by the principle of “*in foro interno, in foro externo*” which means that the competences of the federated entities within the State also extend beyond the State borders. The federated entities work for their own interests in these matters rather than collaborating with the federal state for common interests (Lagasse, 2001; Criekemans, 2006).

This evolution has thus granted the federated entities, including Flanders, the ability to act autonomously in areas that fall under their internal competences, including at the international level. As a result, Flanders possesses concrete international powers, particularly in the cultural, economic, and scientific fields, which it can exercise independently of the federal state.

Theoretical conceptions

1.1. Constructivists and post-structuralists perspectives

To understand the way Flanders projects its identity on the international stage, it is fundamental to examine the theoretical conceptions of identity. Two approaches stand out in this context: constructivism and post-structuralism. Although these theories have different conceptions of identity, they also have common features, such as the important place given to identity and self-definition. These two concepts are considered very important in the social sciences since individuals and states need them to define themselves and others (Versluys, 2007). The “sense of self” is what enables them to act following what they feel is consistent with their identity (Reckinger & Wille, 2011).

Both theories also agree that identity is socially constructed by individuals. However, constructivists state that identity is shaped by different factors such as institutions, the environment, and social structures. This pre-constructed identity then influences the individual and his or her behaviour (Braspenning, 2002). Poststructuralists rather posit that institutions and social structures are not able to determine actions or identity. Identity is not solely the product of institutions or external factors and does not govern individuals' behaviour but is rather created by that behaviour. This view can be transposed to the context of international relations, where post-structuralists postulate that identity is constructed on the international stage in interaction with the various actors. The emphasised characteristics of identity will vary according to the actors and the situations in which language is used (Panizza & Miorelli, 2013). The constructivist view, on the contrary, supports the belief that an actor's identity influences their behaviour on the international stage (Braspenning, 2002). They argue that the phenomena of international politics can be explained by the values and identity of the actors, which are intrinsic pre-social characteristics of the actors. In contrast, post-structuralist thinkers seek to examine which features, identities and values have been mobilised in a particular context and how they have been mobilised within a specific phenomenon (Hansen, 2017).

Both theories agree that identity is versatile, fluctuating based on internal and external factors (Wendt, 1999; Norton & Morgan 2013). The identity attributed to a state by others does not necessarily reflect its own perception, but through interaction, states can test and adjust their constructed identities (Braspenning, 2002).

1.2.Flemish external action and the concept of paradiplomacy

Although the realist view of international relations places the State as the sole actor in international relations, the Vienna Conventions that govern diplomatic and consular relations do not place any restrictions on the type of actor capable of maintaining international relations. According to the second article of the Vienna Convention on Diplomatic Relations there are only two conditions for an entity to enjoy diplomatic relations on the international scene: international legal personality and recognition by the State with which it wishes to establish diplomatic relations. Any actor capable of meeting these two conditions can maintain international relations (Convention on Consular Relations, 1963; Convention on Diplomatic Relations, 1961).

This broader legal interpretation of diplomatic capacity opens the way for other types of actors, here subnational governments, to engage internationally, giving rise to what is commonly referred to as paradiplomacy. This term describes the ability of subnational entities

to conduct foreign relations. It is a combination of the words “parallel” and “diplomacy” and designates a form of diplomacy that operates in parallel with the traditional diplomacy of sovereign states (Crikemans, 2006). Paradiplomacy differs from diplomacy in that it describes a process whereby the federated entities of a sovereign state maintain independent diplomatic relations with a third sovereign state (Chatterji & Saha, 2017). Crikemans (2006) considers this concept a process that is not totally independent of the traditional diplomacy of sovereign state actors. It is rather a process that involves several actors, both inside and outside the national framework. By contrast, Paquin (2001) considers that the role of national diplomacy in the era of multilevel governance is ineffective. He argues that it is unable to reflect the interests of the actors making up the nation and becomes merely a power struggle between the actors involved.

When applied to the case of Flanders, we can talk more specifically about identity paradiplomacy. This concept is described as “*a sub-state foreign policy whose fundamental objective is to strengthen or build the nation within the framework of a multinational country*”² (Paquin, 2003, p. 622). While identity politics in non-sovereign regions are often associated with secessionist movements, many paradiplomatic strategies do not aim at sovereignty, but rather at symbolic differentiation (Paquin, 2023). As Paquin argues, the objective is not necessarily to achieve independence; instead, paradiplomacy can serve as a tool for subnational actors to secure the resources they need to function effectively, while simultaneously promoting a distinct national identity abroad (Paquin, 2003, 2023). The search for recognition is the driving force behind the policies of nationalist sub-state entities, which explains their willingness to build relationships with actors from outside the state and develop a fervent paradiplomacy. For Flanders, the initial aim was to protect the Flemish culture and language by giving full control to a Flemish authority, which led to the creation of Belgium’s Regions and Communities (Crikemans, 2006).

Belgium’s subnational entities are well known on the international stage. Their partners cooperate with them rather than with the federal state in a wide range of areas as both Wallonia and Flanders can conclude treaties (Izquierdo, 2014; Reuchamps, 2015). They have acquired this international autonomy in a process that lasted some twenty years, and over time, they have obtained a “quasi-state” status (Crikemans, 2006; Philippart, 1998). This ambiguous position is well captured by Lequesne and Paquin’s (2017) notion of a “*sovereignty-bound yet sovereignty-free*” space, where subnational actors benefit from the institutional legitimacy of

² Original text : « *une politique étrangère subétatique dont l’objectif fondamental est le renforcement ou la construction de la nation dans le cadre d’un pays multinational* ».

the state while enjoying discursive and symbolic freedom to pursue their own agendas on the international stage. Originally, the purpose of the Flemish government's paradiplomacy was to promote Flanders internationally and publicise its ability to sign agreements with different partners. Indeed, when Flanders acquired autonomy on the international stage, the Region was largely unknown beyond its borders (Crickemans, 2006). Another interest of Flanders is the "*protection of its territorial integrity*" (Paquin, 2003, p. 632). We can also mention the fact that Flanders can find added value in maintaining international relations for each of the competencies it possesses (Crickemans, 2006).

In Flanders, foreign diplomacy is managed by a central body, namely the Flemish Government and its agencies (Reuchamps, 2015). On the Flemish government's website (*Vlaamse Overheid*), the federated entity's international relations with countries or Regions are justified by Flanders' historical place in world trade and by the Flemish characteristics that they consider to be intrinsically international: "*Vlaanderen is internationaal*" (Vlaamse overheid). Cooperation and dialogue with foreign governments are seen as essential to the successful pursuit of Flemish political ambitions (Bynens, 2022). Since the Region has limited resources, the choice of its presence in certain countries was carefully considered: "*[...] the partners which Flanders chose were mostly in those areas in which the Belgian federal government at that time had only limited contacts, or did not prioritise its existing bonds*" (Crickemans, 2006, p. 11). Flanders chose to develop its relations mainly with states with which it shared cultural affinities, in particular the Netherlands and South Africa (Paquin, 2004). Moreover, nationalism is characterised by the definition of national needs and interests which are sometimes in contradiction with those of the central state. This definition of common interests will influence the chosen partners (Paquin, 2004).

Although our study focuses on the Flemish case, it should be emphasised that identity paradiplomacy is not exclusive to the Flemish region. Other sub-state entities such as Quebec, Catalonia, or the Basque Country, have also developed international strategies to present a distinct image on the international stage. In the case of Quebec, paradiplomacy has been used extensively to consolidate a francophone national identity through the promotion of cultural diversity, the French language, and a form of partial sovereignty (Paquin, 2004; Massie & Lamontagne, 2019). Catalonia has structured its international engagement around a revendicated historical memory, a distinct cultural identity, and a commitment to democracy and human rights (Paquin, 2004). As for the Basque Country, its efforts have often relied on diasporic networks that reinforce the image of a millennial culture and a continuous aspiration for autonomy (Totoricagüena, 2005).

As Massie and Lamontagne (2019) highlight, these regions engage in identity-based paradiplomacy, often stemming from long-standing nationalist projects not always aimed for political independence, but they seek symbolic and cultural recognition abroad through organised parallel diplomacy. It should be noted, however, that according to Lequesne and Paquin (2017), Belgium stands out in terms of paradiplomacy due to the aforementioned constitutional principle of *in foro interno, in foro externo*, which gives the federated entities autonomous powers in matters of external affairs, a unique principle from which the other regions do not benefit.

1.3. Academic Approaches to Flemish Identity

Although the concept of identity has often been linked to a uniform national identity, when coupled with the term *Flemish*, the conception of identity appears to be more a distinct regional identity than an identity linked to a unitary conception of the State (Brems, 2006). The notion of identity regarding a people generally refers to the concept of nation, which is often perceived as unique and indivisible within a nation-state. However, once deconstructed, two distinct concepts emerge: the state, referring to the political system and public authorities (CRISP, *n.d.*), and the nation, referring to shared characteristics such as history, culture, or traditions (Perspective monde, *n.d.*). National identity in this article is defined as the articulation of a shared history, culture and values as a means of legitimising the identity of a people.

The concept of regional identity is fairly recent (Izquierdo, 2014), and is connected with the concept of social identity, a type of identity that binds individuals together on the basis of the community to which they belong. With an increasing number of actors within states, who have developed different and sometimes contradictory identities, individuals may identify with their Region rather than with an identity related to the state. The stronger the group identity, the more members feel attached to that group, which can lead to exclusion from another group (Brigevich, 2016; Paquin, 2001). The common characteristics reside in the cultural heritage that needs to be safeguarded and perpetuated (Paquin, 2001).

Alexander Wendt (1999) identifies four forms of identity: personal, role, type, and collective. These identities consist of “*values, beliefs, norms, and ideas collectively produced and reproduced intersubjectively*” (Eiffeling, 2014, p. 3), influencing decision-makers’ understanding of state interests and actions on the international stage. Of particular relevance to regional identity is collective identity, which Wendt (1999, p. 338) defines as “*a common in-group identity*” that allows individuals to see themselves as part of a larger group. Identity, therefore, exists only through the individuals who construct it, reflecting their specific

perceptions of themselves and their environment. However, following Reckinger and Wille's view (2011), there exist only two types of identity which are interdependent but divergent: attributed identities, based on social norms, and appropriated identities, chosen and claimed by individuals. This identity conception is endorsed by Epstein (2010) who argues that subnational identity is more of a process of identification deliberately chosen by individuals than a static concept imposed on them. Regional identities often belong to the appropriated identity category, though attributed identities may influence them. Collective identity does not exist by itself, but through the affiliation of individuals to that identity (Reckinger & Wille, 2011).

Flemish identity, for its part, is often perceived as negative and constructed in opposition to others' identities (Jamin, 2010). This opposition finds its source in historical factors, from which minorities and peoples often derive their identities. When Belgium was created in 1830 following the rise against the Netherlands, a Flemish nationalism emerged, influenced by the adoption of the French-speaking identity against which the Flemish began to define themselves (Pestieau, 1991). The Flemish identity shapes a collective (we) that is supposed to oppose others in a variety of cultural fields (Kerremans, 1997). In this case, the shared characteristics of a common heritage are based on the Dutch language (Laborderie & Couture, 2014) as well as *cultural deprivation*, while the Walloon identity, for its part, relies on *economic deprivation*. (Izquierdo, 2014, p. 23). This identity construction is, therefore, anchored in a dynamic in which people create an identity in opposition to the identity from which they wish to distinguish themselves.

However, the very existence of a Flemish identity is debated among scholars. According to Kerremans (1997), this identity reflects European and Belgian values rather than values specific to Flanders. The feeling of belonging to a Flemish nation is not to be found among the population but rather among the elites, some seeking to promote it, others to dismiss it, while still others try to demonstrate its existence by mentioning the specific features of this identity. Brigeovich (2016) shares this view, noting that it is politicians who give substance to regional identities. Izquierdo (2014) emphasises that the Flemish elites act according to Flemish rather than Belgian values, suggesting that values specific to Flanders do exist, in contrast to what Kerremans argues. Tourret (2001) believes that although the existence of this collective identity is debatable among Dutch speakers, it is real for French speakers, highlighting the Walloon identity's perceived weakness in contrast. However, some authors contest the strength of the Flemish identity that they considered being overestimated. Originally, this identity was neither politicised nor opposed to a Belgian identity (Dalle Mulle & Bieling, 2023).

An analysis of Flemish political party discourses shows that Flemish nationalism stems from a territorial factor. The VolksUnie promotes an open identity that protects the singularity of the inhabitants of the Flemish territory, contrasting with the Walloons' preference for the right of blood. The N-VA (Nieuwe Vlaams Alliantie) emphasises Flemish identity values, with Bart de Wever highlighting Enlightenment values like “*freedom, equality, solidarity, separation of church and state, rule of law, popular sovereignty*” (Counet & al., 2020, p. 8), and Christian values embedded in Flemish morality. Luc Van den Brande, former Minister-President of Flanders, linked Flemish identity with two main areas: the economy and culture. The Flemish Region was presented as better built and better prepared for innovation, with the capacity to be an ‘economic motor’. Culture, for its part, justified Flanders’ position in the economic sector. (Crickemans, 2006)

Interestingly, surveys indicate that both Walloons and Flemish identify similarly with their national and regional identities (43%). Although the Flemish identity is very much present and strong, it is not exclusive (Laborderie, 2014). The way in which the dominant identity is determined is generally linked to context. It depends on the individual and his or her experiences, on ‘the general situation’ and on ‘the immediate context’ (Jacquemain and al., 2006). Unlike Flemish identity, which enjoys strong representation in political and social discourse, Belgian identity remains ambiguous. The Belgian state has never attempted to promote an identity common to the Belgian nation (Izquierdo, 2014). Izquierdo (2014, p. 20) describes Belgium as having an “*identity of non-identity*”, a characterisation echoed by Bart De Wever, who views it as “*too weak to form the basis of a fully-fledged citizenship*” (Counet and al., 2020). This ‘non-identity’ contrasts with the assertiveness of Flemish identity, highlighting the uniqueness of the latter within the national identity landscape.

1.4. The role of language in identity building

Though identity is not only defined by cultural, historical, or political references but also constructed and performed through language, language becomes a fundamental vector through which identity is shaped, articulated, and projected abroad. Thus, it plays an important role in international relations since these relations are shaped through discourse and practice rather than objective characteristics.

For poststructuralist thinkers, language is not simply the reporting and transmission of facts, but a practice that actively contributes to the conception of social reality and identity (Hansen, 2017; Norton & Morgan, 2013). Identity is, therefore, conceptualised as being “*the ‘linguistic construction’ of group membership*” resulting from an act of self-definition (Versluys, 2007, p.

93). Language is the main prism through which identities are created or modified, and the definition of ‘self’ is shaped by interactions. Social realities are intrinsically linked to language, and they do not exist by themselves: language is the means by which social realities are created and given meaning (Versluys, 2007).

Discourses are built on fundamental principles that presuppose the relationship between language, identity and action. Language plays a performative role, meaning that to speak is to act, shaping the reality it describes. Social actors are primarily speaking actors meaning that circulating discourses and social representations govern their actions and the way they position themselves (Epstein, 2010). From a post-structuralist perspective, discourses are inherently political, shaping power relations and societal dynamics. They help construct political borders and generate antagonisms. This perspective challenges the constructivist view that institutions can determine the identity of agents but instead postulates that individuals have an active role to play in defining their identity (Panizza & Miorelli, 2013). States, like individuals, adopt certain discourses depending on their interlocutors. These discourses operate as guidelines that influence the state’s actions towards other states on the international stage (Epstein, 2010).

In foreign policy, actions and decisions are not simply driven by national interests but are shaped by political discourses, historical narratives, ideologies and other factors that influence the way in which foreign policy is established. Post-structuralists argue that “*foreign policy is a discursive practice*” (Hansen, 2017, p. 96). broadening the scope of foreign policy practice beyond mere interests to include discourse and identity (Hansen, 2017). According to Epstein (2010), discourse analysis is one of the most effective methods of apprehending identity which exists only through “*social and cultural performativity*” and built through interaction with the external world (Reckinger & Wille, 2011). Eline Versluys (2007) believes that most discourse analyses are simply limited to demonstrating that identity is a construct, without attempting to look beyond this assertion.

Methodological Approach

As post-structuralist scholars have argued, identity does not pre-exist discourse but is continuously constituted through the performative nature of language, emphasising its characteristics in the international context rather than merely affirming it as a construct. Our analysis posits that identity is not merely a social construct shaped by institutions, as constructivist approaches suggest, but a product of performative acts, particularly within diplomatic discourse. In this view, identity is actively created and reinforced in international contexts through how a region speaks about itself and to others. This makes political discourse a privileged site for examining how subnational entities like Flanders articulate their

distinctiveness on the global stage. This perspective is especially relevant in the Flemish case, where neither the institutional framework nor the literature provides a clear and unified definition of Flemish identity. Rather than assuming a pre-defined identity, this study examines how such identity is built through symbolic and strategic discourse. As a result, this study adopts a post-structuralist approach, viewing identity as constructed through discourse itself. This bottom-up approach, however, does not account for external factors that might influence or interact with this identity.

Diplomatic speeches are the focus of this paper, as diplomats act as spokespersons for the entities they represent and promote on the international stage. To provide a broad analysis, speeches from various Flemish delegations, appointed by the *Department of Kanselarij en Buitenlandse Zaken*, will be analysed. This approach allows for cross-referencing variables and analysing the changes in the speeches based on the speakers and the locations.

Flanders maintains international relations with 11 countries and is a member of 3 multilateral fora. Since diplomacy is often discreet, diplomatic speeches are not freely accessible online. This research collected 21 speeches from 7 delegations and 3 from Flemish political bodies through direct contact, as speeches from past delegations were unavailable. While the limited sample and selection by the delegations themselves may introduce bias, the material still offers valuable insights. This analysis will focus on the current projection of the Flemish identity on the international stage and will not provide a comparative temporal analysis since the representatives were not able to provide us with discourses of previous delegations.

The aim is to spark reflection on Flemish identity and its characteristics on the international stage as no similar studies currently exist.

However, due to confidentiality and the need to protect diplomatic secrecy, the speeches will not be published as such. To ensure anonymity, we categorised the sources as European delegations (ED), non-European delegations (DOE), and Flemish political instances (FPI) to allow an anonymous analysis and compare the image conveyed in the discourses according to their audience.

The category labelled ED contains discourses delivered by Flemish representatives stationed in European nations, serving as official envoys of the Flemish Region in both bilateral and multilateral contexts. The designation DOE pertains to analogous delegations located outside Europe, frequently engaged in the domain of international cooperation and development. Lastly, FPI encompasses speeches articulated by high-ranking Flemish institutional figures who are involved in foreign affairs and represent the political leadership of the Region during significant public events.

This categorisation allows for a comparative approach while preserving the confidentiality of the sources and speakers. The analysis will be carried out in two stages to carry out a qualitative detailed analysis:

- (1) Lexicometric analysis: a statistical analysis of vocabulary that examines the relationships between words. This will include both the most frequent terms and keywords relevant to this research. These words were selected because we feel they belong to the lexical field of identity or Flanders; therefore, their analysis would enable us to come closer to a conception of Flemish identity.
- (2) Content analysis: based on the keywords analysed, this part explores how they are used in different contexts and how they reflect Flemish identity.

Analysis of Flemish Identity Construction through Discourse

1.1. Quantitative analysis

The quantitative analysis provides a basis for the qualitative analysis and is therefore not solely based on the words with the highest occurrence in the discourses but also on selected keywords that seemed relevant and important to examine in the context of this work. Once these data are compiled and sorted by delegation, we obtain the following table:

Table 1. Frequency of Key Terms Across Discourse Categories

		Total Discourses ED	Total Discourses DOE	Total Discourses FPI	Total
1	Flanders	98	89	107	294
2	We	79	78	42	199
3	Government	40	26	25	91
4	Flemish	34	23	14	71
5	People	12	9	14	35
6	Region/regional	5	11	13	29
7	Us	21	10	13	44
8	Cooperation	16	33	9	58
9	Culture/cultural	20	46	6	72
10	Identity	1	4	1	6
11	History	5	1	7	13
12	Heritage	3	28	2	33
13	Belgium	13	16	1	30
14	Language	27	13	5	45
15	Dutch	32	14	3	49

However, to go further, we will be analysing these occurrences of words by reporting the number of times the word is pronounced on average per discourse since our analysis does not include the same number of speeches per delegation. This will allow us to see whether one delegation uses a word more often than another. For this purpose, our formula is the following:

$$\frac{\text{number of occurrences}}{\text{number of delegation discourses}} = \text{average per discourses.}$$

For example, our calculation applied to the word Flanders in the case of delegations in

$$\text{Europe gives: } \frac{98}{12} = 8,16$$

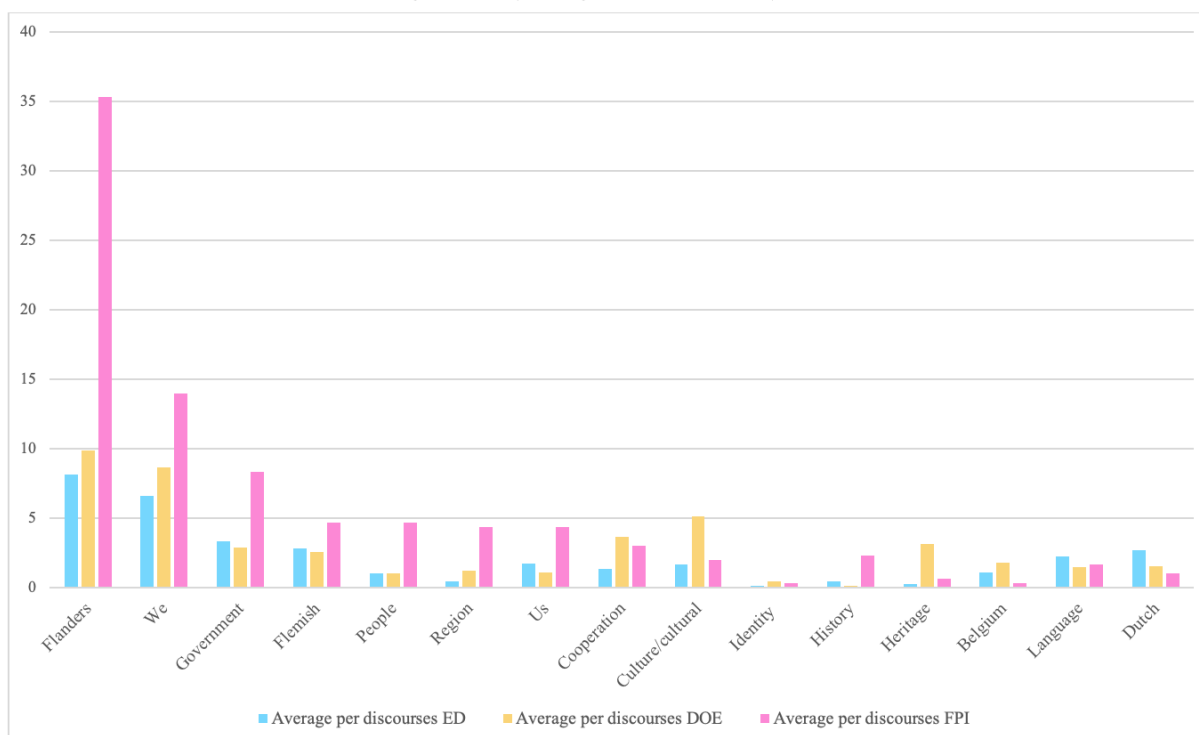
This method enables us to obtain the following table:

Table 2. Average Frequency of Key Terms by Discourse

		Average per discourses ED	Average per discourses DOE	Average per discourses FPI
1	Flanders	8,16	9,88	35,33
2	We	6,58	8,66	14
3	Government	3,33	2,88	8,33
4	Flemish	2,83	2,55	4,66
5	People	1	1	4,66
6	Region	0,42	1,22	4,33
7	Us	1,75	1,11	4,33
8	Cooperation	1,33	3,66	3
9	Culture/cultural	1,66	5,11	2
10	Identity	0,083	0,44	0,33
11	History	0,42	0,11	2,33
12	Heritage	0,25	3,11	0,66
13	Belgium	1,083	1,77	0,33
14	Language	2,25	1,44	1,66
15	Dutch	2,66	1,55	1

For a clearer view of the data, here is a graphical representation:

Fig. 4. Chart of average word occurrences by discourse



We can generally observe a greater occurrence of keywords in the discourses of Flemish political bodies. This tendency is particularly noticeable for the words *Flanders*, *We*, *Government*, *People*, *Flemish*, *Us*, *Region* and *history*. The word *Flanders*, for example, is used 107 times in only 3 speeches, which represents an average number per speech almost four times greater than that of delegations outside Europe and almost five times greater than that of delegations in Europe. In those FPI discourses along with ED and DOE discourses, this word, as well as the word *Flemish*, consistently refers to the Flemish population and territory, underscoring how Flemish representatives emphasise these aspects internationally. The term *people* appear 14 times across the FPI discourses, particularly in 2023. It represents the general population, the Flemish people, and broader communities. In the discourses by the delegations within and outside Europe, this word rarely refers to Flemish people, only once in ED discourses, and not at all in DOE discourses. ED discourses focus more on the people of the partner country or people of the world, while DOE discourses emphasise young people and those in need. In the FPI discourses, the word *government* most often refers directly to the Flemish government and sometimes to the partner countries' government, whereas in the ED discourses, it refers also to the Belgian government. The DOE speeches add a new dimension, emphasising the need to bridge government and citizens.

When it comes to the keywords that designate the language, i.e. *language* and *Dutch*, we can see that these words are used more often by delegations in Europe. Out of the 32 times the word *Dutch* was used by these delegations, there were only three occurrences when it did not refer to the Dutch language. In the discourses of delegations outside Europe, out of the 14 times the word *Dutch* appeared, it did not refer to the language on three occurrences. Finally, it is worth noting that the speeches by the Flemish political bodies contain the word *Dutch* the fewest times; it is mentioned only three times, two of which do not refer to language.

The speeches delivered by the delegations outside Europe, on the other hand, contain the highest number of mentions of the words *cooperation*, *culture/cultural*, *identity*, *heritage* and *Belgium*. This demonstrates the cultural dimension that is very much present in discourses outside Europe, reflecting a strategic emphasis on cultural diplomacy and the projection of a rich, distinct identity.

We can also note the very low rate of occurrence of the word *identity* in all the discourses. This indicates that Flemish identity is not directly presented as such on the international stage but is distilled through various dimensions that are mentioned in the speeches. The discourses by the delegations outside Europe are those with the highest rate of occurrence of this word (4). They only link it once to the word *Flemish*. Otherwise, the word is used to talk about the

importance of preserving identity in general. In the case of delegations in Europe and Flemish political bodies, the word identity is always linked to the word Flemish. Finally, the limited number of references to the name *Belgium* in all the discourses – especially in FPI where it appears only once to reference the National Bank of Belgium – may indicate a desire of Flanders to assert itself as an independent nation and detach itself from its parent State.

The scarcity of explicit references to Belgium, particularly in FPI discourses where the term appears only once, may be interpreted as a desire to emphasise an asserted regional autonomy. While this is not direct evidence of a strategy of dissociating identity from its parent State, this discursive tendency could nonetheless be part of a logic of symbolic distinction.

1.2. Qualitative analysis

1.2.1. Themes' presentation

Although guided by the keywords previously quantitatively studied, our analysis is structured around different themes covered in the various discourse. This method will allow an optimal and detailed analysis by avoiding theme repetitions which would have been unavoidable with a word-structured analysis.

Among the discourses of the delegations and political bodies, we have identified the following five main themes that will structure the analysis: (1) development and innovation, (2) international cooperation, (3) economy and trade, (4) education and (5) culture and heritage.

These themes are defined as follows:

- (1) Development and innovation: this category includes all references to research, innovation and development in the discourses.
- (2) International cooperation: this theme covers Flanders' partnerships abroad and the mention of international projects. This category also includes the way in which Flanders presents itself to its partners.
- (3) Economy and trade: this category encompasses Flanders' trade and economic relations, the region's economic situation and references to entrepreneurship.
- (4) Education: this category touches on the various aspects of education and educational systems. It focuses on learning, school programs, and transmission through education.
- (5) Culture and heritage: this thematic area refers to culture, history and heritage. It involves preserving, promoting, and passing on heritage and traditions, as well as highlighting emblematic figures.

1.2.2. Content analysis

Prior to addressing the themes that are most revealing of the construction of Flemish identity, it is worth mentioning the first three categories, regularly mobilised in the discourses analysed: (1) development and innovation, (2) international cooperation, and (3) the economy and trade. Although these themes are abundantly present, they are part of a logic common to most diplomatic discourse. As such, they reveal few truly distinctive elements of Flemish identity, and will therefore be summarised here.

i. Development, innovation, international cooperation, economy and trade

In the speeches given by the Flemish delegations in Europe, the issue of development and innovation is mainly addressed from the angle of green technologies and scientific research. The representatives highlighted the Region's substantial investment in these areas, as well as the importance of international cooperation, particularly in the context of the Flemish Presidency of the Council of the European Union. In terms of international cooperation, cross-border partnerships with neighbouring countries were highlighted, with a view to proximity and efficiency. On the economic front, the speeches highlight the region's logistical assets, such as the port of Antwerp, and encourage foreign investment, while reaffirming Flanders' ambitions in terms of the circular economy.

The speeches from delegations outside Europe adopt a complementary perspective. Development and innovation are presented as levers for building future-oriented relations with emerging countries, positioning Flanders as a pioneer in the field of sustainability. International cooperation is based on partnerships founded on shared values, such as good governance, human rights and social entrepreneurship. As far as the economy is concerned, Flanders is described as a dynamic exporting region with a strong potential for innovation and an entrepreneurial culture that is perceived as intrinsic.

Finally, Flemish political bodies are characterised by a noticeable absence of any reference to the economy or trade. Development and innovation are approached from a more introspective angle, as a reflect of the intellectual and creative capacities of the Flemish people. International cooperation is presented as a tool for disseminating regional priorities on a global scale, mainly through cultural diplomacy, seen as a privileged vector for dialogue and recognition.

ii. Education

Keywords used in this field: (1) Flanders, (4) Flemish, (9) culture/cultural, (10) identity, (12) heritage, (14) language, (15) Dutch.

The educational dimension plays a greater or lesser role in the studied discourses.

The delegations as well as the political bodies of the Flemish Region all stress the importance of university exchanges and joint research programs that they are setting up with the partner countries, and the richness resulting from these exchanges.

The speeches underline the importance of the language, and more specifically the Dutch language. For delegations in Europe, it is important to promote the use of the Dutch language and present it as a living language in which people create, invent, and build a better future. Both delegations in Europe and the delegations outside Europe are promoting the creation of Dutch language study programs in universities. *“Quality education is the key here, including the mastery of a rich Dutch language. This knowledge of Dutch will also become an absolute priority in primary education, as well as in secondary, higher and adult education. In doing so, due attention will also be paid to supporting Dutch as a science language”*³ (Discourse ED6).

Although generally defending the same thing, i.e., better education for all and promotion of the language, the delegations do not present it in the same way. For the delegations in Europe, it is the Flemish Region that prevails. They advocate improving the education system, which is already considered to be performing well. The motto is for the improvement of the system and of the population’s skills. Delegations outside Europe, on the other hand, are more focused on the help they can provide to their partners to reform their education systems and to make them more efficient and include culture and heritage in the school curriculum to raise awareness of their importance. *“Respect and understanding of intangible cultural heritage must begin with the younger generations. It is vital that our children and youth understand the tenuous nature of intangible heritage and that they grasp how imperative it is that we safeguard these treasures. By bringing heritage into the classroom, we not only foster respect and enthusiasm, but the learning itself is enhanced”* (Discourse DOE5).

For the Flemish political authorities, the educational dimension is also intertwined with the cultural dimension. However, they see this through the prism of the representation of Flemish culture and values abroad. They assume that a solid education will lead to intellectual exchanges between the Region and partner countries. In this way, they believe that students educated in Flanders will be able to export regional culture and values abroad. Speaking of the Flemish students abroad they stated: *“We consider these students to be a new kind of public ambassador, who will help highlight Flanders’ image as a top innovative Region even more. With this*

³ Original text: *“Kwaliteitsvol onderwijs is daarbij de sleutel, inclusief de beheersing van een rijke Nederlandse taal. Die kennis van het Nederlands wordt ook in het basisonderwijs een absolute prioriteit, net als in het secundaire onderwijs en het hoger en volwassenenonderwijs. Daarbij wil men ook de nodige aandacht schenken aan de ondersteuning van het Nederlands als wetenschapstaal.”*

objective in mind, they will be introduced to all relevant diplomatic, economic, academic and cultural networks in their respective study countries” (Discourse FPI 2023).

A major focal point is the notions of equality and inclusiveness that are distilled in the education dimension. The discourses highlight the importance of quality education for all. The importance of “*no one is left behind*” which is often mentioned in the discourses demonstrates the desire to ensure everyone is included. Some of the speeches even mention Flemish initiatives that give substance to this vision and enable students to study at the best universities.

iii. Culture and heritage

Keywords used in this field: (1) Flanders, (2) We, (3) government, (4) Flemish, (5) people, (7) Us, (9) culture/cultural, (10) identity, (11) history, (12) heritage, (14) language, (15) Dutch

When it comes to emphasising history and culture, Flemish delegations and political bodies usually use the same symbols.

They link the greatness of Flanders with great historical achievements. For foreign delegations, it is the Battle of the Golden Spurs against France that is mentioned. This battle, which took place in the 14th century, gave its date to the Flemish National Day (Hérodote , 2018) and is the pride of the Flemish region, since it is considered to be “*a significant moment in Flemish identity building*” (Discourse ED11). Whereas in the case of political bodies, it is the Flemish canon and the various great figures that the Region has counted that is highlighted.

Art also plays an important role in the various discourses. The importance of artistic exchanges from immemorial times is mentioned, whether it be the great Flemish masters of the time, bi-national collaborations, or new forms of art such as digital art.

The most frequent theme in the discourses was the importance of preserving the heritage. Both the delegations and the political bodies refer to this, whether in terms of helping to establish an education system that teaches local culture and traditions, recognising the importance of preserving historic buildings, or demonstrating its attachment to the culture and history of peoples by showing its support for Ukraine. When reference is made to Flanders’ support for this war, they deplore not only the casualties and the material losses, but also “[...] *They risk being left displaced, losing their parents and grandparents, and not knowing their own canon, history, culture and language. They risk losing their place in the world*” (Discourse FPI 2023). This demonstrates Flanders’ attachment to the culture and history of its people, as well as its desire to maintain and defend a national identity and its language. “[...] *losing their place in the world*” supports the assertion that Flanders is attached to the right of the soil (Counet et al., 2020). This desire to safeguard also demonstrates a commitment to transmitting values, culture, and history to future generations.

As far as the values of Flanders and the characteristics of the Flemish people are concerned, only the political institutions' discourse expresses them clearly. They emphasise the image of the Flandrien and a winning and determined mentality, as well as the principle of openness.

1.3. Comparative analysis

The following observations can be drawn from these quantitative and qualitative analyses:

We can note in a general manner that in the various fields, delegations from outside Europe tend to emphasise the dimension of assistance and development aid. They present Flanders as a prosperous nation that has nothing to be envious of the great powers and that can be beneficial for the development of cities and countries. They also emphasise the importance of working with different representatives of the society and not just the government and try to encourage people to get involved and participate in the process of change so that they can impact their future.

The delegations in Europe and the Flemish political bodies, for their part, highlight Flemish successes in various areas and the desire for improvement. In the case of the many projects, they express how Flanders is an excellent partner and highlight the region's qualities in many areas. The partnerships focus more on the governing bodies of a country or region.

In the discourse of the delegations in Europe, the words Dutch and language are used frequently. This underlines the emphasis on language and its promotion, as well as the image of Flemish people. They referred to language as an essential means of communication, but also as a strong symbol of the region's culture and autonomy. Although the discourses of the delegations outside Europe and those of the Flemish Political Instances also demonstrate this emphasis on culture, the delegations in Europe put even more emphasis on the functional side of the Dutch language, which is very much alive and spoken by millions of people throughout the world.

In the discourses of Flemish political bodies, there is an emphasis on the individual. Indeed, they highlight the talents and knowledge of the Flemish population, refer to the pioneers who enabled Flanders to develop and highlight the benefits of international cooperation for the Flemish people. This emphasis on the individual is indicative of a desire to elevate the individual as a pillar of society and to underline the fact that the nation's strength lies in its citizens.

We can also highlight a notion of the future reflected in the discourses. On several occasions, we can see a notion of the long-term advocated by Flanders, particularly in partnerships that are intended to last over time. In addition, they emphasise Flanders' desire to play an even greater role on the international stage in the future and to maintain its prosperity in the future.

Finally, whether in education, the economy or other areas, we can see that Flanders is willing to invest now to reap the benefits later. A concrete example is the fact that the Region is investing massively in its population so that later, through cultural exchanges, this population will spread Flemish values and culture abroad.

The comparative analysis of the discourses reveals that there are clear differences in how Flemish identity is articulated across the various types of discourses. These differences are not simply rhetorical but reflect the institutional positioning and diplomatic function of each actor. In line with Hansen's (2006) post-structuralist perspective, identity here is not pre-existing but performed through language, varying according to the discursive context and intended audience. Therefore, what unites these discourses is a shared vision of Flanders as a prosperous and forward-looking society, grounded in the development of the individual and the promotion of Flemish values and culture. It is a vision that seeks to honour a rich cultural heritage while engaging with future challenges and expanding the region's reach on the international stage.

As we emphasised in the section about regional identity, national identity can be defined as "*the articulation of a shared history, culture, and values as a means of legitimising the identity of a people*" (voy. supra). According to the post-structuralist approach, this conception of identity can be reflected in the international scene through language. If we apply this definition to our analysis, we obtain:

Shared history - The history presented in the discourses differs from the history of the Belgian state born in 1830, which would have witnessed the emergence of a Flemish nation instead of the French-speaking community. It is a much older history rooted in the successes and achievements of the Flemish over the centuries. We can cite, for example, the Battle of the Golden Spurs, where the Flemish defeated the French cavalry, but also the artistic collaborations of the Flemish master painters. This perspective aims to highlight an identity and heritage that are firmly rooted in a long tradition of significant contributions to the construction of that identity.

Shared culture – The Flemish culture that is being highlighted is a diversified and dynamic one, divided into several dimensions: entrepreneurship, language, festivals and heritage. The first dimension, entrepreneurship, emphasises an entrepreneurial spirit that is deeply rooted in Flemish culture, notably because of the Region's position in this field. As for Flemish heritage, it is particularly stressed as a testimony to a long and rich history. It is therefore particularly important to preserve it, but also to make it known abroad. The language dimension is one of the founding pillars of Flemish culture. It is considered particularly important, and its preservation is a central element of foreign policy. Finally, festivals and celebrations are

mentioned as traditions in Flanders, but also as privileged moments to express the Flemish identity.

Shared values – Concerning the values considered intrinsic to Flanders and the Flemish people, we can note the following: principle of resilience, openness, leadership, cooperation, inclusion, equality, and individualistic values. The principle of resilience is an essential value for the Region. It is highlighted in the discourses by the image of the *Flandrien* who perseveres and never gives up. This resilience is reflected in the ability of the Region and its people to overcome challenges, innovate and adapt. Openness is omnipresent in the discourses of both delegations and political bodies. This openness applies to various fields: the economy, culture, but also open-mindedness. The Region presents itself as open to the world and ready to welcome new partnerships and commit to new projects. This principle is reflected in a policy of cooperation on the international stage. Leadership highlights the fact that Flanders is a leader in various fields, due to the achievements of its people and the pioneers who made its history. Cooperation flows from this, as the region emphasises the importance of working together to achieve great things, whether at local, national or international level. The dimensions of inclusion and equality are linked, as Flanders strives to create a society where everyone has their place and to overcome inequality through the principle of ‘no one is left behind’. Finally, the values of Flanders are mainly rooted in a principle of individuality in the sense that the individual is at the centre of the policy. It recognises the importance of the individual and his or her necessary contribution to the construction and preservation of the Flemish nation.

Conclusion

This article examines how Flanders constructs and projects its own identity in the context of its international relations, through the diplomatic discourses produced by various Flemish bodies. Adopting a post-structuralist approach, it highlights the central role of language in the construction of identity: identity does not exist outside discourse, but is constructed, performed and negotiated through it.

The analysis reveals significant differences in the way Flemish institutions articulate this identity. Diplomatic delegations use a more assertive, outward-looking language, while political bodies adopt a more implicit stance. These differences reflect the institutional dynamics specific to each actor and serve as a reminder that identity is constructed in and through the discursive context.

Despite this diversity, the discourses all centre around common elements: a historical narrative that diverges from the narrative of the Belgian state, a culture rooted in the preservation of language and heritage, and a set of values such as resilience, openness,

cooperation, and entrepreneurship. Flemish identity is therefore built on shared aspects of history, culture, and values, as articulated in international discourse.

By analysing these discourses, the article illuminates how Flanders aims to assert a distinct identity and an autonomous presence on the world stage. This approach helps us better understand the complex, sometimes unconscious, layers embedded within identity discourses, and how a non-sovereign region shapes, projects, and adjusts its identity in the global arena.

This study completes the existing literature on identity paradiplomacy by focusing on discourse rather than explicit claims. It invites further reflection from a comparative and diachronic perspective, in order to gain a better understanding of how the discursive strategies of subnational entities evolve over time and across contexts.

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