

# Linguistic Policy of Belgium

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**Abstract:** Belgium is a trilingual country with the federal organization, consisting of four different entities which are constituted purely on the basis of languages. The linguistic policy in Belgium is strongly linked with politics, this contribution briefly outlines the historical situation that lead to the country's present linguistic legislation. This article is the starting point for the description of the state of affairs concerning bi-multilingual education in the three Belgian regions. The linguistic groups that comprise population of Belgium have a long history of conflict. In Belgium for many years tension between French and Dutch speaking areas have been solved through the principle of territoriality and this principle solved the tensions between linguistic groups by guaranteeing linguistic rights within geographic boundaries. The Belgian experience in dealing with a multicultural and multi-linguistic polity clearly provides commendable work for other national groups which are facing an ever increasing heterogeneity among their linguistic populations.

**Keywords:** Linguistic Policy, Multilingual, Guaranteeing, Commendable, Heterogeneity.

Belgium officially the kingdom of Belgium is a federal monarchy in Western Europe. It is the founding member of the European Union, it covers an area of 30,528 square kilometers and it has a population of about 11 million people. It's often said that Belgium is a bilingual country but more accurately it is a trilingual federal state. It has three official languages i.e; Dutch, French and German. The constitution of Belgium recognizes three linguistic communities: the Dutch speaking Flemish, the French speaking Francophones (including the Walloons), and the German speaking Germanophones. Dutch speakers account for 54.2% of the population, Francophones for 34.1%, Germanophones for 1% and allophones (used for other communities except these three) for 10.7%. A number of non-official, minority languages and dialects are spoken as well. English is widely spoken throughout the country as a second or third language by native Belgians. Belgian federal government uses more than one language but not its federated regions. It has ten provinces and these are administrative entities governed by the regions. Before the federal structure and the language legislation gradually introduced in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, French was generally the only language used by public authorities. Since 1967 the Dutch version of the constitution has equal status to the original French, and since 1991 the German version is official.

The Belgian constitution guarantees since the country's independence, freedom of language in the sphere of privatization. Article 30 specifies that "the use of languages spoken in Belgium is optional only the law can rule on the matter, and for acts of the public authorities and for legal matters." Article 4 divides the country into linguistic areas, which form the basis of the federal structure "Belgium has four linguistic areas: the French-speaking area, the Dutch-speaking area, the bilingual area of Brussels capital and the German-speaking area."

The four language regions are:

- 1) Flanders is in the north. Flemish is the official language of this region. Flemish is a version of Dutch.
- 2) Wallonia, which is in the south, has French as its official language.
- 3) German is the official language along a narrow strip along the German border.
- 4) The Brussels region is officially bilingual.

Although the Brussels region is considered officially bilingual, more than 75% of its inhabitants speak French as their first or only language. Dutch is the language of education in Flanders, and French is taught as second language. French is the language of education while Dutch is studied as a second language in Wallonia. The official status of Dutch and French in Belgium is mostly debated. Every official organization and political parties need organizations and publications to include both in French and Dutch speakers. French belongs to the Romance language family and Dutch belongs to the Germanic language family. Both are the members of the Indo-European languages.

Following a usage which can be traced back to the Burgundian and Habsburgian courts in the 19<sup>th</sup> century it was necessary to speak French to belong to the governing upper class, and who could only speak Dutch were effectively second class citizens. Late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> century, Flemish movements evolved to counter the situation. While the people in southern Belgium spoke French or dialects of French, most of the Brusselers adopted French as their first language, but Fleming refused to do so and succeeded progressively in making Dutch an equal language in the education system. After the World War II, Belgian politics became increasingly dominated by the autonomy of its two main linguistic communities.

Based on the four languages areas defined in 1962-63 (the Dutch i.e., bilingual, French, German language areas), consecutive revisions of the country constitution in 1970, 1980, 1988, 1993 established a unique form of a federal state with divided political power into three levels:

- 1) The federal government, based in Brussels.
- 2) The three language communities:
  - The Flemish Community (Dutch-speaking)
  - The French Community (French-speaking)
  - The German-speaking community.
- 3) The three regions:
  - the Flemish Region, subdivided into five provinces
  - the Walloon Region, subdivide into five provinces
  - the Brussels-Capital Region.

In the constitution, language areas determine the official languages in their municipalities, as well as the geographical limits of the empowered institutions for specific matters. This would allow for seven parliaments and governments. When the communities and regions were created in 1980, Flemish politicians decided to merge both, the Flemings. Just one single institutional body of parliament and government is empowered for all except federal and specific municipal matters. The overlapping boundaries of the Regions and communities have created two notable peculiarities i.e., the territory of the Brussels-capital Region is included in both the Flemish and French communities and the territory of the German-speaking community lies wholly within the Walloon Region.

Belgium also comprises three communities and each of these communities has a parliament and an executive or community government led by a president-minister. Jurisdiction over language matters lies jointly with these communities and with federal parliament. Article 129 of the Belgian constitution with reference to article 30 is clear in its imposition of two restrictions: first, communities can regulate language use only in the areas of administration, education and private-sector operations. Second community jurisdiction is limited to each one's linguistic borders to their unilingual institutions in Brussels and for the Flemish community to its Flemish houses abroad. The German-speaking community's powers are even more limited and apply only to education in the school. In other words, Belgium's Franco-Dutch-German trilingualism is not egalitarian, but its Franco-Dutch is bilingualism.

Strictly speaking Belgium does not regulate language use among citizens, when these citizens call of a specific linguistic community. They must follow in the language of the institution's home community. In unilingual linguistic regions citizens have no language choice of course because the institutions operate in only one language. But in Brussels citizens have a choice- French or Dutch as an administrative language as a language of instruction in schooling.

Belgium communities have six major jurisdictions: language use (taking deletable) cultural affairs, education, cooperation, scientific research, human welfare matters i.e., health, social assistance, family services, persons with disabilities, youth services) and finance. In the linguistic issues, communities can issue decree but these must also comply with federal laws.

Belgiums federation applies territorial unilingualism in Wallonia, in Flanders and in the German speaking region, but it resorts to Franco-Dutch bilingualism in the Brussels region. But in the Brussels region there is a Franco-Dutch bilingualism. Outside the Brussels the federal administration works only in one language i.e., French in Wallonia, Dutch in Flanders. Brussels-based federal civil service (Brussels-capital) must be bilingual and provide services in both French and Dutch. Under article 19 of an act adopted on July 18, 1966 and governing Belgium's entire linguistic and administrative system specially use of language in administrative matters, all local services in Brussels-capital must use the same official language which is Dutch or French as a client or citizen being served. All federal administration documents are drafted in the country's three official languages. For example, income-tax notices sent to Wallonia's French speaking citizens must be identical content-wise and typographically to send to Dutch speakers in Brussels or to German speakers and the only difference is the language in which the document is written. There are no bilingual documents in Belgium even in the Brussels region; all documents are unilingual either in French or Dutch.

Belgium's federal administration is organized into parallel language networks. The country's laws and regulations state that 40% of the state's civil servants must be unilingual Dutch, another 40% unilingual French, 20% bilingual (Dutch-French) but evenly split between Flemish and Walloons. The French language and Dutch language networks work solely in their respective language and to communicate between networks French-speaking or Dutch speaking civil servants must call on the networks of bilingual civil servants. The ministry of justice, the ministry of the interior or domestic affairs and the ministry are actually split into two entities one is Dutch speaking and another one is French speaking.

Education is compulsory from 6 to 18 years of age for Belgians. Among OECD (Organization for Economic Cooperation and Development) countries in 2002, Belgium had the third highest proportion of 18 to 21 enrolled in post secondary education at 42%. It is estimated that 99% of the adult population is literate. The Programme for International Student Assessment (PISA), coordinated by the OCED, currently ranks Belgium's education as the 19<sup>th</sup> best in the world, being significantly higher than the OCED average. Education being organized separately by each, the Flemish community scores noticeably above the French and German-speaking communities.

Mirroring the dual structure of the 19<sup>th</sup> century Belgian political landscape, characterized by the liberal and the catholic parties, the educational system is segregated within a secular and a religious segment. The secular branch of schooling by the communities, the provinces, or the municipalities, while religious, mainly catholic branch education, is organized by religious authorities, although subsidized and supervised by the communities.

The use of languages by the authorities is determined, as well as the use of languages by the administration and the army, the courts and in the field of education and businesses. The constitutional freedom of language remains absolutely intact in the only thing that remains the private domain. In Brussels Dutch speakers are forced to speak French when dealing with certain public services, like police officers on the street and certain hospitals. There is bilingual information at the railway station in Brussels. At present there are still tensions concerning Brussels-Halle-Vilvoorde.

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