

# Multilingual Brussels: past, present and future

Philippe Van Parijs

in *The Brussels Reader. A small world city to become the capital of Europe* (Eric Corijn & Jessica van der Ven eds.), Brussels: VUB Press, 269-289..

What is the actual linguistic situation — as opposed to the official linguistic status — of the Brussels-Capital Region, both as regards the native languages of its residents and their linguistic competence? What are the underlying trends? And what feasible and desirable future can we hope for and contribute to turning into reality? These are the central questions which this chapter aims to answer.<sup>1</sup> But before doing so, I would like to provide, very sketchily, some historical and demographic background against which the linguistic facts can make more sense.

## 1. History: from the Aula Magna to the Berlaymont

Around 1430, Brussels was a little town in the Duchy of Brabant with about 7000 households, nearly all of which spoke Brabants, a Germanic dialect close to present-day Dutch. It had a beautiful town hall on its *Grote Markt*, but its textile-driven economy was not doing too well. An irreversible decline could not be ruled out. The local authorities then had an idea, which would prove of momentous importance for the linguistic fate of their town. Philip the Good, duke of Burgundy had managed to aggregate, through inheritance, marriage or conquest, quite a large territory that included Brussels, and he was in the process of creating one of Europe's first state-like administrations. But he kept moving his court from one town to another, from Besançon and Dijon to Bruges, Ghent, Leuven, Mechelen or Brussels. Perhaps the Duke could be persuaded to settle in Brussels if the prospect was made sufficiently attractive to him? In this hope, the Brussels authorities made him an offer. If he promised to make the town the permanent seat of his court, they would not only give him a hunting ground — a *warande* — just next to his palace on the Coudenberg (at the location of the current Parc Royal or Warandepark). More importantly, they would expand his palace by building at their own expense a huge room — an *Aula Magna* — in which he could hold parties and convene his *Etats généraux*, the regular meetings of the representatives of his various provinces. The Aula Magna took about thirty years to be built (its foundations can still be visited under the Place Royale), but its erection had the intended effect. The new building — for a while the largest civil room in this part of Europe — hosted the *Etats*

---

<sup>1</sup> I am extremely grateful to Luca Tomasi for enabling me to access promptly the 2012 Eurobarometer data, to Jonathan Van Parys for processing them efficiently, and to Rudi Janssens for kindly supplying some data not included in the latest Taalbarometer published report (Janssens 2013). The present chapter can be viewed as an update of one of the first *Brussels Studies* (Van Parijs 2007), largely based on the 2005 Eurobarometer data.

*généraux* consistently from 1465 onwards, as well as other memorable events such as the emancipation of Philip the Good's great-grandson, emperor Charles V in 1515 and his abdication in 1555.<sup>2</sup> Consequently, the clumsy model of the rotating capital was abandoned and Brussels gradually became, especially under Charles V, one of Europe's most important capital cities. What does this old story have to do with the linguistic situation of Brussels today? A great deal. Had it not been for the Aula Magna, it can safely be said that French would not be the dominant language in today's Brussels any more than it is in today's Mechelen or Ghent. It is to the Aula Magna that the little town of Brussels owes its promotion to capital status, and it is in French that the Dutch-dialect-speaking town of Brussels started and kept functioning as a capital city.

Similarly today, it does not need much stretching of the past nor speculation about the future to ascribe an analogous effect to the erection of another building: the Berlaymont. In the middle of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, like five centuries earlier, there was a new entity being born through gradual aggregation, one that was also destined to grow much larger in subsequent decennia and that lived for a while on the model of a rotating capital. Its smallish administration was provisionally located in Brussels in February 1958 owing to there being no consensus as to the definitive location of the seats of the Communities created the previous year by the Treaty of Rome. Brussels happened to be the capital of the country that came first, alphabetically speaking, among the six countries initially involved. Its government, therefore, was the first in charge of the rotating presidency and hence of the responsibility to provide suitable premises. This *siège précaire* of the commission of the European Economic Community could in principle be changed any time at short notice, but the Belgian authorities offered to erect a massive new building close to the office block occupied by the EEC's first *fonctionnaires* on the Avenue de la Joyeuse Entrée.<sup>3</sup> The site was that of a convent school that originated next to the cathedral, in what used to be the mansion of Charles de Berlaymont, mainly remembered for a sentence he uttered in 1567 at the entrance of the Aula Magna in order to disparage a crowd of noblemen protesting against the Inquisition: "*Ne les écoutez pas Madame, ce ne sont que des gueux.*" Like the erection of the Aula Magna, the erection of the Berlaymont is now having totally unexpected linguistic consequences. Firstly, the building served as a magnet for many other new buildings hosting the institutions of what has been called since 1992 the European Union, including an hemicycle for its Parliament and, most recently, a separate building for the European Council. Brussels was thus turned, step by step, into the official capital of a political entity even larger than Charles V's empire. Secondly, after some decades, the dominant language inside the Berlaymont and in most EU-related activities gradually switched from French to English as a result of successive enlargements. Trickle-down effects are to be expected for the city as a whole, fundamentally analogous to those that followed, with long delays, from Brussels having emerged as the capital of the Dukes of Burgundy.

---

<sup>2</sup> On this episode of Brussels' history, see e.g. Dumont (2001: 63-65), Jacobs (2004: 110-12).

<sup>3</sup> On this and many other aspects of the laborious settling of "Europe" in Brussels, see Demey (1991 and 2007)

## 2. Demography: the three thirds of the Brussels population

This bird-view historical account of the linguistic impact of two buildings will help us understand some aspects of today's linguistic dynamics in Brussels. But some more recent demographic facts are hardly less important. Very schematically, they can be summarized for present purposes as follows. Since the first settlements on the island of St Gorik over a thousand years ago, the population of what is now the territory of the Brussels-Capital Region kept growing, with a few more or less protracted regressions owing to wars or plagues. It reached an unprecedented peak in 1968, with about 1,050,000 registered inhabitants. However, by the time the Brussels-Capital Region was created twenty years later, it had shrunk by 10%. It then stabilized for a while, and since 2000, it has been growing again, even twice as fast as the other two regions, and is now far above its 1968 peak. What accounts for this unusual pattern? Essentially, the combination of three phenomena.

Firstly, since the late sixties, there has been a constant net outflow of *Belgo-Belges* (also known as *oude Belgen* or *autoctonen*), defined roughly as people whose parents and grandparents were born Belgians. Thousands of *Belgo-Belges* migrate into Brussels every year from the whole of Belgium, but far more of them migrate out of Brussels into the rest of Belgium, mainly Flemish and Walloon Brabant. Had Brussels been able to count only on these *Belgo-Belges*, its population would have shrunk today to far less than half of what it was in the 1960s. This first phenomenon, however, has been partly offset since its inception — and more than compensated since the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> century — by a net inflow from abroad, both from outside Europe — mainly Morocco and Turkey — and from other European countries — with France at the top. This second phenomenon is at the source of a third one: both the ethnic and the age composition of the Brussels population resulting from this immigration pattern led to a surplus of births over deaths significantly higher than in the other two regions. This sufficed to stabilize the population in the last decade of the twentieth century and has been contributing to its growth ever since.

The snapshot outcome of the combination of these three phenomena is a Brussels population made up of roughly three thirds. The biggest but shrinking third is made up of *Belgo-Belges*. Next, a smaller but swelling third is made up of Belgian citizens of recent foreign origin, who acquired Belgian citizenship either as a result of being naturalized themselves or as a result of at least one of their parents or grandparents being naturalized. The bulk of this second third consists of people of non-EU origin, for whom the acquisition of Belgian citizenship, sometimes consistently with keeping their own native citizenship, offers significant practical advantages. Finally, another small yet also swelling third is made up of non-Belgians, mostly EU citizens, who have sometimes been living in Brussels generation after generation but have no intention to take up Belgian nationality.

### 3. Data: beyond snapshots and bi-tribal lenses

The combination of this historical sketch and of this demographic overview should make the basic linguistic facts about Brussels intelligible to us. But where can these facts be found? We often hear peremptory claims about the proportion of francophones/Franstaligen versus néerlandophones/Nederlandstaligen in Brussels, based for example on the number of identity cards or birth certificates issued in either French or Dutch, or on the number of tax forms filled in in either language, or on the number of votes cast for francophone versus Flemish parties at the regional elections.<sup>4</sup> The picture that underlies such claims is one of a city inhabited by two tribes, mutually exclusive and jointly exhaustive of the Brussels population. But as the sketchy demographic overview above should suffice to show, this picture is deeply misleading. Over half a century ago, when the *Belgo-Belges* formed the huge majority of the Brussels population, this picture might still have been defensible despite a significant proportion of hybrids, mostly Flemings in the process of being Frenchified. Today however, this bi-tribal picture is out of touch with the linguistic reality of Brussels, and every year that goes by makes it even more surrealistic. To read the linguistic reality of contemporary Brussels, we need lenses that allow for more than two colours, and we need to distinguish more sharply questions relating to native languages and to linguistic competence.

Are the relevant data available? For the whole of Belgium, the national census used to provide detailed information about the language usually spoken by residents. But as a result of a boycott by hundreds of Flemish mayors in the 1960s, the linguistic section was dropped in subsequent censuses. The best we have had since is provided by the European Commission, namely the three editions of the “Eurobarometer Special Languages” (data collected in 2000, 2006 and 2012), based on a fairly small but quite reliable sample of the population of each member state of the EU. European residents are there asked about their mother tongue and about their competence in other languages, if any: do they speak those languages well enough to be able to hold a conversation. Self-assessment of this sort is not exactly reliable for the sake of determining the actual competence of a particular person, but it is not bad for the sake of giving a good idea of differences in average levels of competence across countries and even more across generations (where differences are not affected by possible differences across languages in the connotations of the words used in the question). Objective assessment of people’s competence is of course also possible, but hugely more expensive. It was done for the first time by the European Commission in 2012 for a number of countries and a number of languages, but only with samples of secondary school pupils who had studied at least one of the main European languages for at least two years.<sup>5</sup> It is therefore not suitable if the aim is to provide an overall picture of the

---

<sup>4</sup> For a sophisticated illustration, which combines interesting forecasting tools with a misleading bi-tribal lens, see Lambert and Lohlé-Tart (2010).

<sup>5</sup> See <http://ec.europa.eu/languages/eslc/index.html>.

linguistic competence of the population of a particular country. However, the results of this very fragmentary external assessment corroborate the more comprehensive results based on self-assessment.

I shall therefore present and discuss some of the latter results in the next section to give a rough picture of linguistic competence in the EU, in Belgium as a whole, in Flanders and in Wallonia. A decomposition of these results according to age group enables us to move beyond a mere snapshot to get insights into the dynamics at work. It is not provided explicitly in the Eurobarometer report, nor are subnational data, for example relating to Belgium's regions. But the data base is available free of charge for research purposes, and can be processed to produce the data most relevant in the present context.<sup>6</sup> Note, however, that the weighting system used in all Eurobarometer surveys to generate a representative picture of each member state and of the EU as a whole is not calibrated to produce reliable estimates for each region of each member state, even though the region of residence of each respondent can be identified in the data set. The agency TNS, in charge of the survey, therefore insists that regional data should only be used "à titre indicatif"

As regards the Brussels region, the Eurobarometer sample is unfortunately too small to produce reliable data. However, we are blessed with another survey, based on a much larger representative sample of the Brussels population, namely the Taalbarometer of the Vrije Universiteit Brussel coordinated by Rudi Janssens. Three editions of the survey have been conducted, respectively in 2001, 2006 and 2011. They provide more refined information on native languages than the Eurobarometer data, as the question asked is not "Which language would you say is your mother tongue?", but "What language or languages do you or did you speak in conversations with your father and with your mother?". The Taalbarometer survey also contains very interesting data about other subjects, such as the way in which Brusselsers characterize their own identity or their view of Brussels' future, but these will not be analysed here. Some key results of the 2011 Taalbarometer on native language and linguistic competence will be presented and discussed in section 6 below.

Note, however, that even with the rich data of the Taalbarometer survey, it will be impossible to answer some simple questions like "How many different mother tongues do Brussels residents have?" or "How many different languages are spoken every day in Brussels homes?". We know for sure that these numbers will be far less than the 6000 or so languages more or less alive somewhere on the planet, but also far more than the official languages of the 200 or so countries with a diplomatic representation in Brussels. Just take the case of the Democratic Republic of the Congo. Its four national languages (Lingala, Swahili, Kikongo and

---

<sup>6</sup> *Europeans and their Languages*. Special Eurobarometer 386 / Wave EB77.1, June 2012, 147p. Fieldwork conducted in February - March 2012, report published in June 2012, survey requested by the European Commission, Directorate-General for Education and Culture, Directorate-General for Translation and Directorate-General for Interpretation and co-ordinated by Directorate-General for Communication. Along with other researchers, I greatly appreciate the EC's policy of making their database available for research purposes.

Ciluba) are all strongly present in Brussels, but what about the other 200 more local languages spoken in Congo? Surely, among the 9000 Congolese Brusselers and the even more numerous Belgian Brusselers of Congolese origin, many must have some of these languages as their mother tongues and speak them at least occasionally with friends or relatives. However, the chance that any one of these languages will show up in the Taalbarometer samples of 2500 Brusselers each is slim.<sup>8</sup> For lack of a linguistic census, therefore, the least vague that we shall ever be able to say about our local linguistic diversity is: “Brusselers know and speak hundreds of languages.”

#### **4. The bigger picture: Europe and Belgium**

The language situation in the capital of a country is not always an exact reflection of the language situation in the country as a whole. This is even less likely to be the case for the capital of a quasi-federation of countries such as the European Union. It is nonetheless relevant to be aware of linguistic trends in the EU as a whole, if only to contrast them with the linguistic dynamics in its capital and in the member state in which the latter is located.

As indicators of linguistic trends in the EU and in Belgium, I shall use throughout the percentages of respondents in four age groups (15-24, 25-40, 41-65 and 65+) who mention a particular language as their mother tongue or who say that they speak a language other than their mother tongue well enough to be able to hold a conversation in it. I shall assume throughout that differences in linguistic competence observable in this way can be interpreted as differences between cohorts (depending on when one is born, one is led to learn different languages) rather than between age categories (depending on how old one is, one has acquired and forgotten languages to different extents). On this assumption, the snapshot picture of inter-generational differences can serve predictive purposes: as the older generations die off, average linguistic competence will move closer to the currently observed competence of the younger generations, bearing in mind that the most intensive learning period of the youngest one (currently aged 15-24) is not yet completed.

As regards native languages, the most striking trend perceptible through inter-generational comparison is the relative decline of the EU’s most widespread language, German (Graph 1). With close to 16%, it is still 2% ahead of its closest competitor, Italian, when all generations are taken together.<sup>9</sup> But with Italian also declining fast, it is now English, which has maintained itself better, that has become the top mother tongue among the under 45. This is due to a persistently low rate of birth in Germany and Austria, but also to the fact that Germany’s main linguistic minorities, whether Turkish, Polish or Russian, tend to retain their language from generation to generation, contrary to most North Africans settling in France, for example. This decline in

---

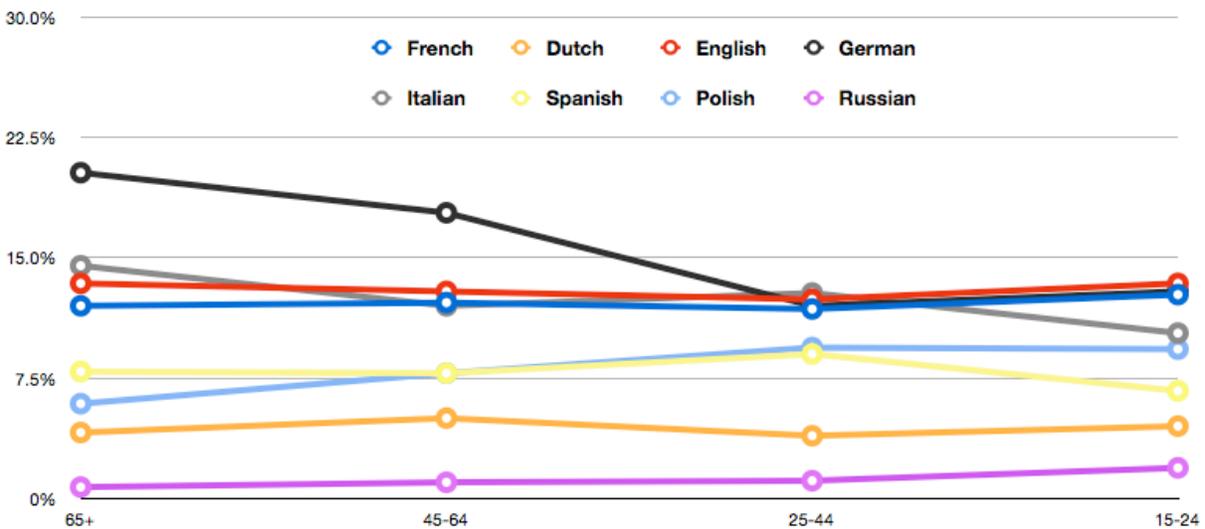
<sup>8</sup> The number of different languages which at least some Brusselers said they could speak well or very well was 72 in the 2001 sample, 96 in the 2006 sample and 104 in the 2011 sample (Janssens 2013: chapter 1).

<sup>9</sup> A snapshot overall picture, taking all age groups together, is given in the first graph of the appendix.

German as a native language is compensated by an increase in competence in German as a learned language, mainly as a result of its being learned well by German residents with a different mother tongue. As we move from native languages to linguistic competence (Graph 2), however, by far the most massive trend is the spectacular increase in the knowledge of English from the oldest to the youngest generation. Linguistically speaking, the 65+ and the 15-24 live in a different world, especially bearing in mind that in most countries the intensive English-learning period is not yet completed by the age of 15.

**Graph 1**

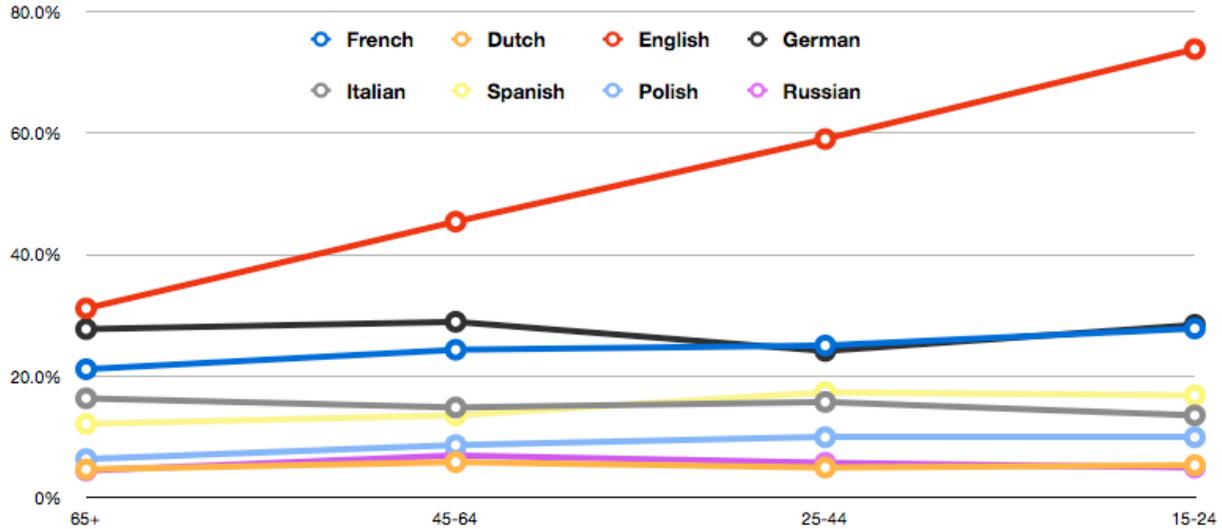
**EU27: Mother tongue by age group (2012)**



Proportion of respondents who say of a particular language that it is their mother tongue  
 Source: Database Eurobarometer 2012. Data processing and graph: Jonathan Van Parys

## Graph 2

### EU27: Linguistic competence by age group (2012)



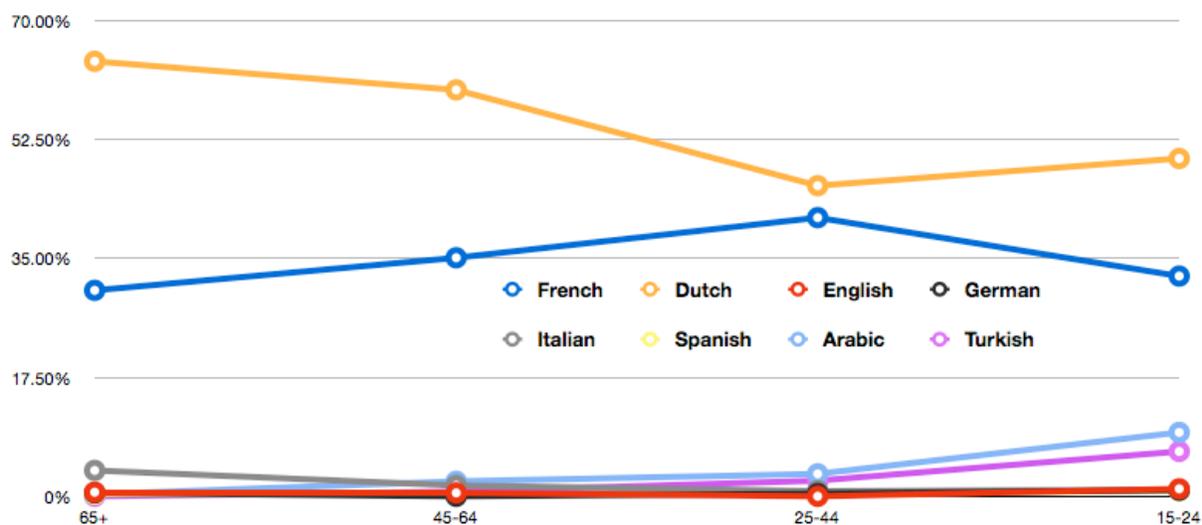
Proportion of respondents who say of a particular language either that it is their mother tongue or that they speak it well enough to be able to hold a conversation in it

Source: Database Eurobarometer 2012. Data processing and graph: Jonathan Van Parys

The overall picture for Belgium is, as might be expected, very different from the overall picture for the EU. Dutch and French, in that order, dominate all other languages as Belgium's mother tongues. However, contrary to what might be expected, the third language is not Belgium's third official language, German, but Italian for the older generations and Arabic for the young (Graph 3). If the sample is trustworthy, Arabic and Turkish native speakers together now account for 5% of the total population, and even 16% of the youngest cohort: among the 15-24, there is one Belgian resident with either Arabic or Turkish as his or her mother tongue for every two with French and every three with Dutch as their mother tongues. The relatively small sizes of the samples demand that these assertions should be made with some caution.

**Graph 3**

**Belgium: Mother tongue by age group (2012)**



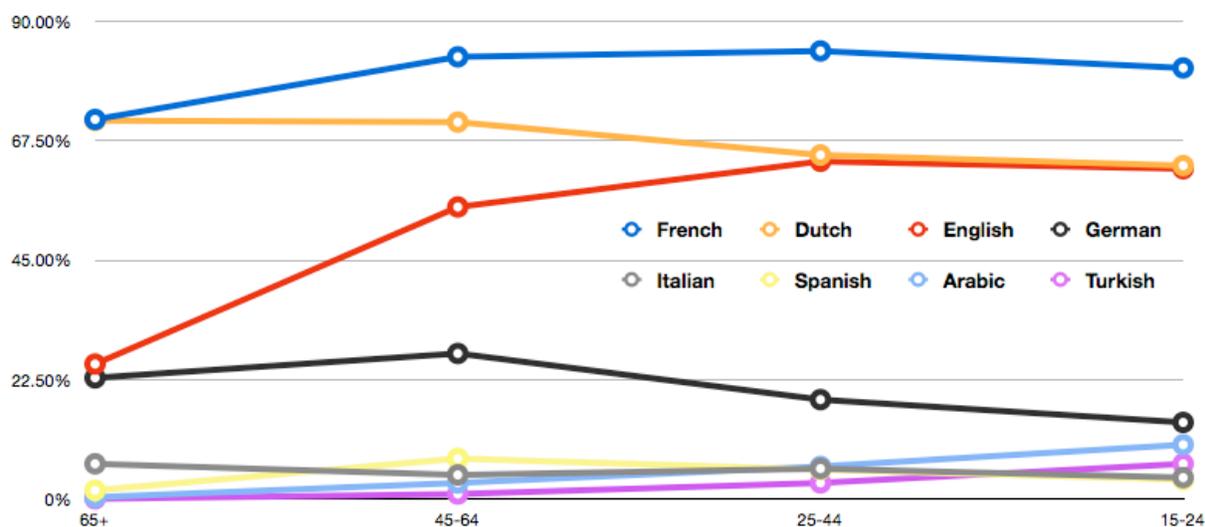
Source: Database Eurobarometer 2012. Data processing and graph: Jonathan Van Parys

As regards linguistic competence, Dutch and French still dominate for the population as a whole, but the order is reversed (68%/81% for linguistic competence versus 55%/36% for native languages) because of French being far better learned by Dutch native speakers than the other way around. Moreover, English (with 62.2%) is now very close to overtaking Dutch (with 62.9%) in the youngest cohort (Graph 4). For this cohort, when it will have completed its intensive foreign language learning period, the country's first language in terms of mother tongue is likely to have become the third one in terms of competence. And the trend revealed by the sequence of the other three cohorts — from 72 to 84% for French, from 25 to 64% for English — suggests that even the first place of French cannot be taken for granted.<sup>10</sup>

<sup>10</sup> See graph 2 in the appendix for an overall picture, with all age groups lumped together.

Graph 4

Belgium: Linguistic competence by age group (2012)



Source: Database Eurobarometer 2012. Data processing and graph: Jonathan Van Parys

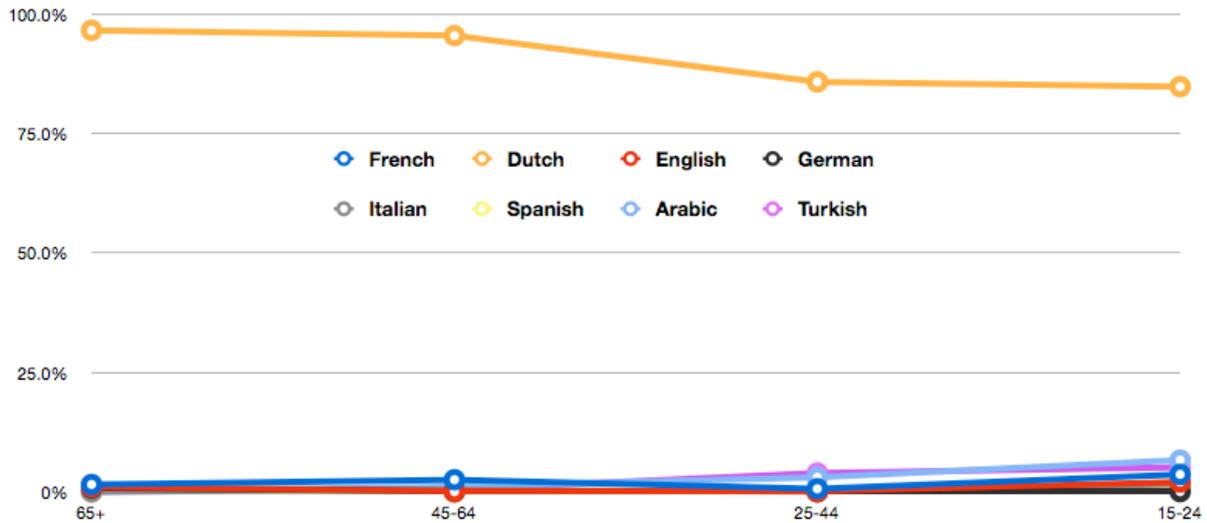
### 5. Neighbours: Flanders and Wallonia

No less interesting is the picture that emerges as we zoom on Flanders and Wallonia, first in terms of mother tongues (Graphs 5 and 6). Unsurprisingly, Dutch and French are each overwhelmingly dominant in the region in which they hold an exclusive official status (with some quantitatively minor exceptions: mainly the six Flemish municipalities with linguistic facilities adjacent to the Brussels Region and the nine municipalities of the German-speaking community in the east of the Walloon Region). But whereas the dominance of Dutch in Flanders is decreasing (from 97% in the oldest generation to 86% in the youngest one), the dominance of French in Wallonia has been growing (from 84% in the oldest generation to 90% in the third one). This contrast, also salient in the earlier Eurobarometer data, can be interpreted as the straightforward reflection of the two regions' respective economic trajectories: prosperous regions attract more foreigners than struggling ones, and are therefore more likely to have large linguistic minorities: hence the presence of Italian as the mother tongue of many older Walloons, and of Arabic and Turkish as the mother tongue of many younger Flemings. The exception to this pattern is the particularly high score of Arabic in the youngest Walloon cohort (14%). This may well be due to a statistical fluke (this sub-sample consists of only 29 individuals). If not, it could perhaps be attributed to selective migration by large families attracted by the relatively low cost of housing. Further, it is also worth noting that the proportion of Dutch native speakers in Wallonia (2.8%) now appears to be higher than the proportion of French native speakers in

Flanders (1.9%). With land and house prices significantly lower in Wallonia, is there now a new oil stain drifting south?

**Graph 5**

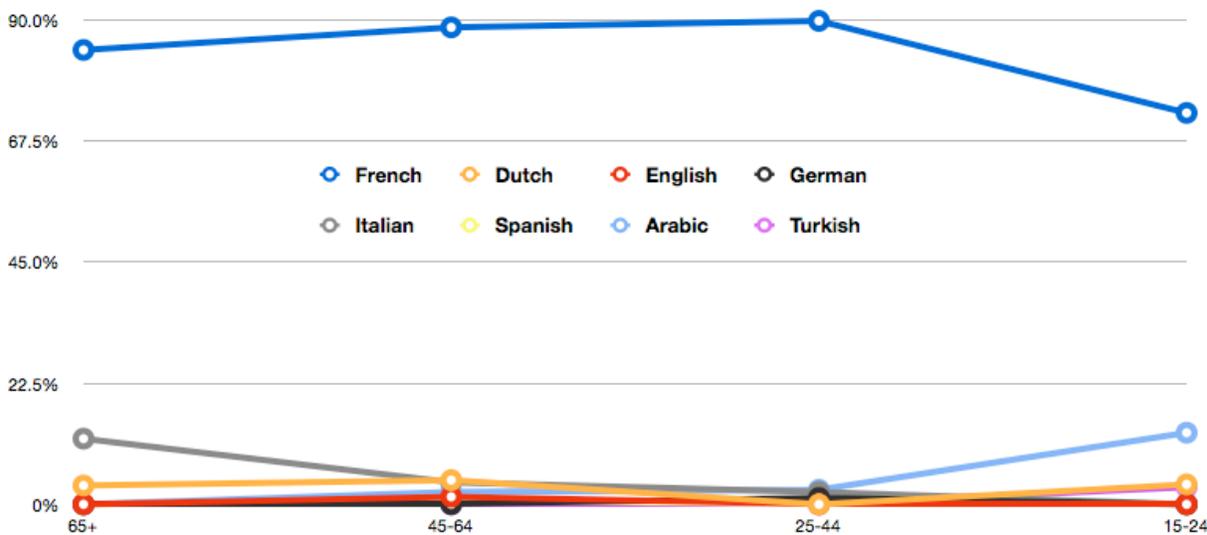
**Flanders: Mother tongue by age group (2012)**



Source: Database Eurobarometer 2012. Data processing and graph: Jonathan Van Parys

**Graph 6**

**Wallonia: Mother tongue by age group (2012)**



Source: Database Eurobarometer 2012. Data processing and graph: Jonathan Van Parys

As regards linguistic competence, there are both striking similarities and differences between Flanders and Wallonia (Graphs 7 and 8). In both regions, whereas in the older age groups the second best known language (after the region's official language) is the other main national language, it has become English in the younger age groups (81% versus 71% for Flemings, 38% versus 26% for Walloons in the 25-44 cohort). The levels of competence, however, are very different in the two regions. For a combination of reasons — proximity of France, long-term historical legacy of officially francophone Belgium, and the self-reinforcing fact that few Belgian francophones communicate easily in Dutch — Flemings are on average far more competent in French than Walloons are in Dutch (69% versus 21%).<sup>11</sup> Competence in Dutch is definitely greater for the middle age groups than for the oldest one. But whether the youngest generation will do better remains to be seen: as for most Walloon children school is the only way of learning Dutch and devotes some time to it only at secondary level, the (not exactly brilliant) score achieved in the 15-24 period according to the (small) sample cannot be regarded as final.

Further, Flemish respondents are also far more competent in English than Walloon respondents (68% versus 28%). As EU-wide comparisons show, this cannot be attributed mainly to a slightly greater linguistic proximity between Dutch and English than between French and English. (Why would Estonians or Fins be better at English than the French or the Walloons?) A far more plausible interpretation points to Flemish children's extensive early exposure to English, thanks to subtitling being used instead of dubbing for English-language films. The significance of this factor also shows up in the fact that the level of English is lower for the 15-24 age group than for the older one in Wallonia but not in Flanders (nor in Europe as a whole): if you can enjoy the learning advantages of subtitling, you can reach a good level of English by the age of 15 far more easily than if you have to count on formal schooling alone.<sup>12</sup> Finally, we can now also see that the reason why German is the fourth known language in Belgium has nothing to do with its being an official language in parts of Wallonia, and far more to do with the high degree of linguistic proximity between Dutch and German, possibly combined again with more access to non-dubbed films.

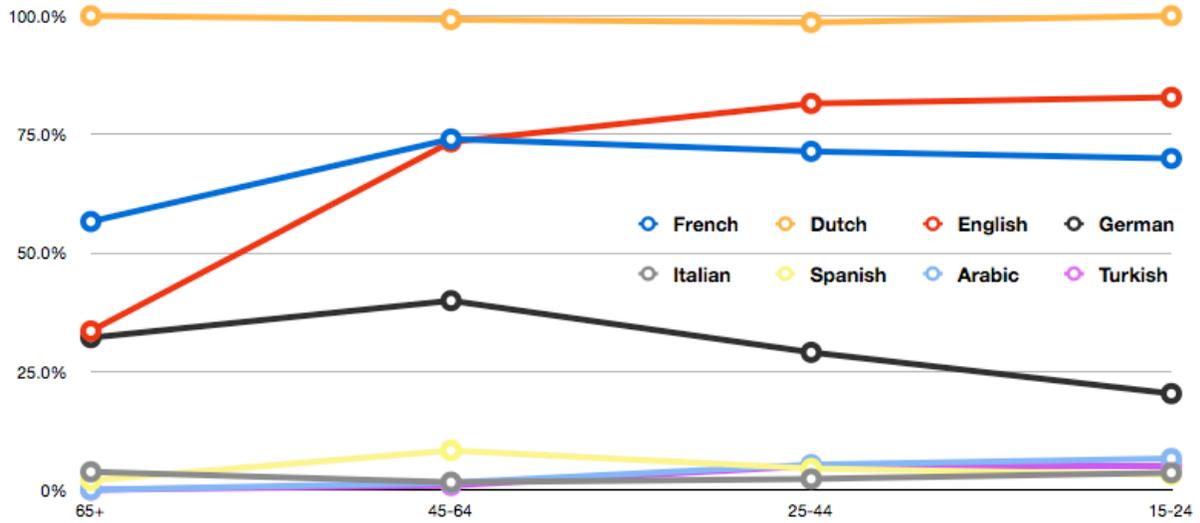
---

<sup>11</sup> See graphs 3 and 4 in the appendix for an overall picture, with all age groups lumped together.

<sup>12</sup> See the distributive-justice case for a ban on dubbing in sections 3.7 and 3.8 of Van Parijs (2011a).

**Graph 7**

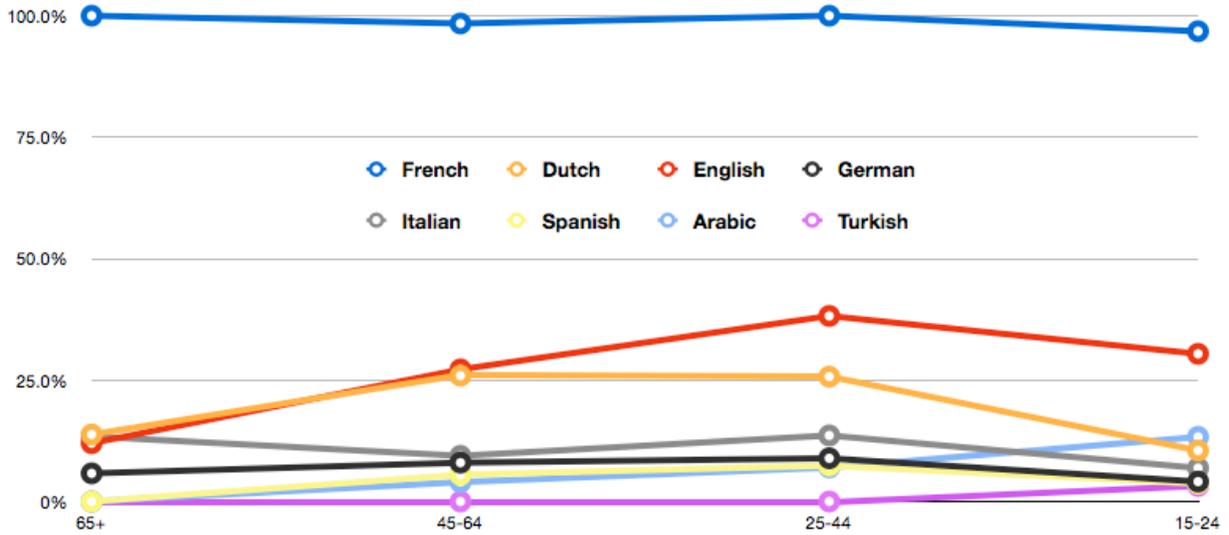
**Flanders: Linguistic competence by age group (2012)**



Source: Database Eurobarometer 2012. Data processing and graph: Jonathan Van Parys

**Graph 8**

**Wallonia: Linguistic competence by age group (2012)**



Source: Database Eurobarometer 2012. Data processing and graph: Jonathan Van Parys

## 6. Brussels today: Arabic and English as second languages ?

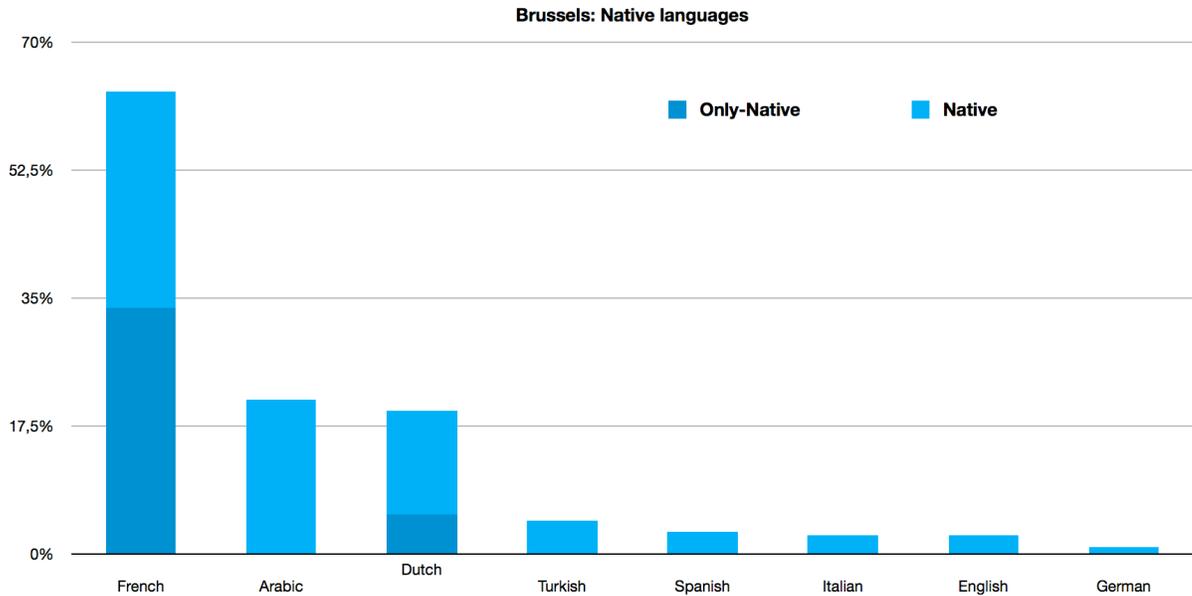
As mentioned above, in the case of the Brussels Region, the Taalbarometer, being based on a much larger sample, provides more reliable data than the Eurobarometer, especially for minority languages and for age groups taken separately.<sup>13</sup> I shall therefore use mainly the data collected at the end of 2011 and partially presented in the most recent Taalbarometer report (Janssens 2013). The sample is not perfect. It uses as a starting point a random selection from the national register and the survey uses questionnaires in French, Dutch, English and Arabic. It turns out, however, that only 20% of the respondents are non-Belgians, whereas their proportion in the officially registered Brussels population is 32%. This suggests that the linguistic diversity documented in the Taalbarometer is an understatement of Brussels' reality. Yet, this is by far the best source of information we possess.

As regards native languages first, French remains by a long distance the most widespread language. About two thirds of the respondents report that French was the language or one of the languages that were spoken at home in their childhood. This is far more than the 21% for Arabic, which has now overtaken Dutch (20%) as Brussels' second native language. None of the other languages reaches 5% (see Graph 9). It is worth noting, however, that the respondents who report French only as their mother tongue form only one third of the sample, whereas they were still over 50% five years earlier. Thus, as regards native languages, with a good 30% of pure "francophones", 5% of pure "néerlandophones" and 15% of "bilinguals" in the Belgian sense, the picture that emerges contrasts sharply with the conventional (and institutional) representation of the Brussels situation.

---

<sup>13</sup> The overall picture emerging from Eurobarometer 2012, with all Brussels age groups lumped together, is given in Graph 5 of the appendix.

**Graph 9**  
**Brussels: Native languages (2011)**

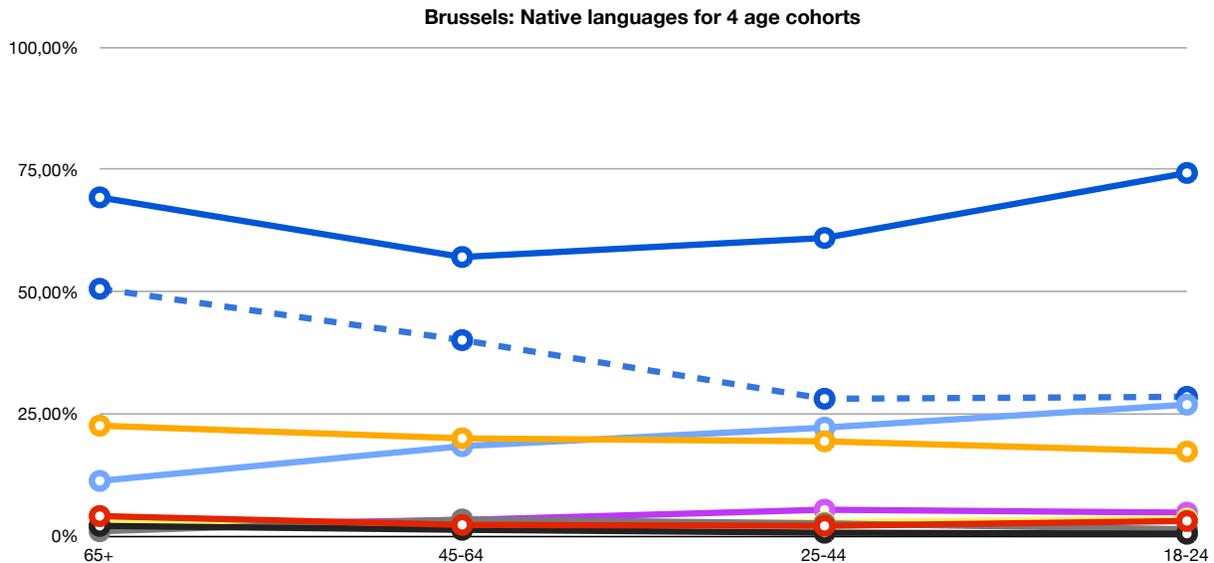


Source: Database Taalbarometer 2011. Graph: Jonathan Van Parys

In the case of French and Dutch the dark part of the column shows the proportion of respondents who say that French and Dutch, respectively, were their only home language when they were children.

As in the case of the EU, Belgium and the other two regions, the underlying dynamics can be captured by a decomposition of the data into age groups (Graph 10). Predictions must be made with greater caution, though, because the rate of migration into and out of a city like Brussels is several times higher than is the case for much larger regions. From generation to generation, both French and Dutch decline quite steeply as exclusive native tongues, but manage to maintain themselves thanks to being combined with each other or with other languages. The other most remarkable phenomena are the steep rise of Arabic, uncontroversially Brussels' second mother tongue in the youngest age group and, to a lesser extent, the emergence of Turkish as Brussels' fourth language.

**Graph 10**  
**Brussels: Native language by age group (2011)**

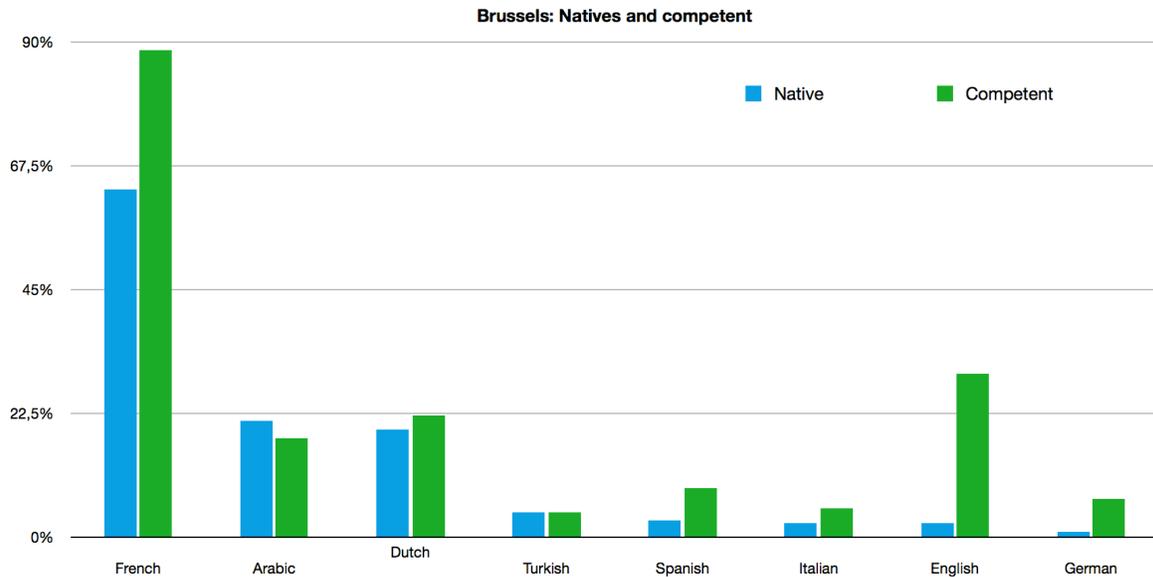


Source: Database Taalbarometer VUB 2006. Graph : Jonathan Van Parys

The full lines refer to proportions of Brussels residents with a particular language as their native language or one of their native languages, the dotted line to the proportion with French as their only native language

As we turn from native language to linguistic competence (Graph 11), French, as should be expected, becomes even more dominant, with 89% claiming to know French well or very well. Despite being less learned at home than Arabic, Dutch (with 23%) leaps ahead of Arabic (18%) in terms of competence for two reasons. Firstly, contrary to all other languages, there are less people who claim competence in Arabic than people who spoke some Arabic at home when they were children. Secondly, the opposite is true for Dutch, though to a very modest extent compared to French. Unsurprisingly, however, in Brussels just as elsewhere, the most spectacular difference between native language and competence concerns English, which has clearly become, with 30% of competent speakers, Brussels' second language. It is, however, noteworthy, that the proportion of competent speakers in all three of Brussels' top languages has gone down relative to the 2006 Taalbarometer: from 96 to 89% for French, from 35 to 30% for English and from 28 to 23% for Dutch. The proportion of people competent in none of these three languages, by contrast, rose over the same period from 2.5 to 8%.

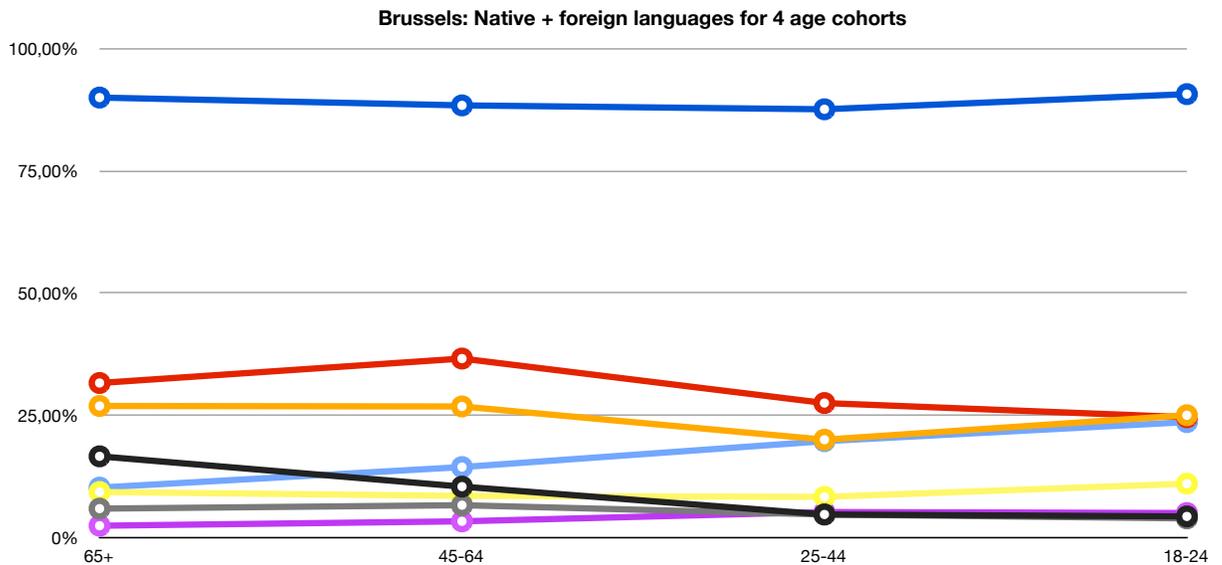
**Graph 11**  
**Brussels: Native language and linguistic competence (2011)**



Source: Database Taalbarometer 2011. Graph: Jonathan Van Parys

Some insight into what underlies some of these surprising trends can be gained from looking at the data by age groups (Graph 12). French is stable from generation to generation, though at a lower level than five years earlier, which suggests immigration by non-Francophones in all age groups. The lower level of English competence in the youngest group can easily be explained in the same way as in Wallonia: by the fact that the learning of English is not yet completed at 18. More surprising is the fact that competence in English is weaker among the 25-44 than in the older cohorts, as this age group should have completed most of its learning process and moreover partly consists of people with a good knowledge in English settling in Brussels after the age of 25 because of its European function. As regards competence in Dutch, its rise in the youngest generation is presumably due to the attraction of Dutch-medium schools for non-native families, also reflected in the proportion of respondents mentioning Dutch as one of the languages spoken at home in their childhood. By contrast, the decline, from generation to generation, of the proportion of pure Dutch native speakers must account for the corresponding fall in competence in German (fourth language in the oldest group, only seventh in the youngest). Finally, competence in Arabic rises in line with its presence as a native language.

**Graph 12**  
**Brussels: Linguistic competence by age group (2011)**



Source: Database Taalbarometer VUB 2011. Graph : Jonathan Van Parys

Proportion of respondents who claim to master a particular language well or excellently, whether or not as a mother tongue

To sum up, French is firmly entrenched as Brussels' first language in terms of both native language (1/3 of the total alone, 1/3 in combination with another language) and competence (nearly 9/10 of the total). This makes it nearly as dominant as Dutch and French, respectively, in Flanders and Wallonia in terms of (self-assessed) competence, but not in terms of native language. Next to French, there are two main minority native languages, Arabic and Dutch, both around 20%. When competent secondary speakers are added to competent primary speakers, Dutch becomes somewhat stronger and Arabic somewhat weaker, while English leaps from very little to second position (30%).

## 7. Brussels tomorrow: trilingual+

Against the factual background thus summed up, what would a possible and desirable linguistic future for Brussels look like? Answering this question requires answering three prior non-linguistic questions: Will Europe ever leave? Will Belgium ever split? Will Brussels ever grow? My answer to each of these three questions, suitably specified, is no. Needless to say, this is not the place to provide a full justification for each of these claims.<sup>16</sup> I shall here simply take

<sup>16</sup> I do so at some length in Van Parijs & Van Parys (2010) for the first question, in Van Parijs (2012) for the second one, and in Van Parijs (2011b) for the third one. These papers can all be downloaded from my website (<http://www.uclouvain.be/11688.html>).

for granted that it is extremely unlikely that, in the course of this century, (1) the main political institutions of the European Union will move from Brussels to another city; (2) the federal state of Belgium will disaggregate into two or three independent states; (3) the Brussels-Capital Region will be allowed to expand so as to include its hinterland, i.e. roughly the provinces of Vlaams Brabant and Brabant wallon.

Once these assumptions are made, it should be obvious that the learning of languages — and in particular the acquisition of an adequate knowledge of French, Dutch and English — is exceptionally important for those who grow up in Brussels, not least for those who speak yet another language at home. It is exceptionally important for each of them individually, to help them find a job in Brussels or its hinterland but also to give them the option of settling comfortably either in Flanders or in Wallonia as accommodation in Brussels becomes more and more expensive. It is also exceptionally important for the city's economic dynamism and its good functioning as capital of the EU: the main collective asset of the home-grown population must be its ability to serve as an efficient link between the increasingly English-speaking international activity in Brussels-Capital and the two neighbouring regions, one Dutch-speaking, one French-speaking, on which this activity depends in all sorts of ways.

In Brussels, at the same time and for closely related reasons, the learning of languages should be less difficult than elsewhere, providing one manages to mobilize intelligently the linguistic wealth and good will available in Brussels itself and in its hinterland. This requires early learning and innovative teaching of more than one language in all Brussels schools, but also exploiting all sorts of synergies between schools, the media, social partners, voluntary associations and above all families. It requires, in other words, what could be called a *Marnix plan for a multilingual Brussels*. Philippe de Marnix de Sainte Aldegonde (1540-1598) was a polyglot humanist and anti-Inquisition leader who was born and grew up in Brussels. In one of his posthumous writings, he formulated what may well be the first plea for the simultaneous learning of several languages through immersion at a young age.<sup>17</sup> In the spirit of this plea, what is needed in Brussels is a vigorously positive attitude towards language learning, especially at an early stage in life, and a bold concerted effort by parents, schools and a wide variety of other stakeholders to develop the coherent learning of several languages, combining a priority for French, Dutch and English with the encouragement of the transmission of all native languages.<sup>18</sup>

Such a Marnix plan would give a concrete shape to a wish expressed in the very first EU document that dared to refer to Brussels as the “capital of Europe”. In a report published in October 2001, a group of “intellectuals” mandated by European Commission President Romano Prodi and European Council president Guy Verhofstadt came up with a few suggestions as to

---

<sup>17</sup> Marnix (1615: esp. pp. 29 and 109; French translation pp. 35 and 91).

<sup>18</sup> The Marnix Plan ([www.marnixplan.org](http://www.marnixplan.org)) is being inaugurated on 28 September 2013 in the Zinneke Room of the Brussels Information Point, just a few hundred meters from where Philippe de Marnix was born and even closer to the location of the Aula Magna, which played such a crucial role (as explained in section 1) for Brussels’ linguistic fate.

how Brussels could “best express the needs and functions of a European capital”. One of them was to set up an “Institute for Multilingualism” that would “pool together the knowledge concerning multilingualism, including speaking, reading, translating and interpreting second and third languages, teaching them and communicating such plurality in more attractive and user-friendly ways”.<sup>19</sup> Creating a new institution may do some good, but a broad bottom-up movement is far more promising, both for Brussels’ population itself and as a model for what should also be possible in other places. Such a movement must build hundreds of bridges across the many cleavages — between Flemings and francophones, between “expats” and “immigrants”, between “believers” and “*laïcs*” — in order to replace mutual ignorance, rivalry and distrust with mutual appreciation, emulation and support. It must build on the many existing initiatives and weave them into an exciting common project.

The capital of the European Union, as we saw, hosts an extraordinary and growing linguistic diversity. This can turn out to be a disaster, both in terms of social cohesion and in terms of economic prosperity. It can also be turned into a blessing, but only if we Brusselers of all origins mobilize vigorously to make ourselves and each other far more multilingual than we are. This is what the Marnix Plan is about. This is why it must succeed.

## References

- Demey, Thierry. 1991. *Bruxelles. Histoire d'une capitale en chantier. Vol.2 : De l'Expo 58 au siège de la C.E.E.*, Bruxelles : Legrain.
- Demey, Thierry. 2005. *Brussels Capital of Europe*, Brussels: Badeaux.
- Dumont, Georges-Henri. 2001. *Histoire de Bruxelles. Biographie d'une capitale*, Bruxelles: Le Cri.
- Jacobs, Roel. 2004. *Een geschiedenis van Brussel*, Tielt: Lannoo.
- Janssens, Rudi. 2001. *Taalgebruik in Brussel. Taalverhoudingen, taalverschuivingen en taalidentiteit in een meertalige stad*. Brussel : VUB Press.
- Janssens, Rudi. 2007. *Over Brussel gesproken. Taalgebruik, taalverschuivingen en taalidentiteit in het Brussels Hoofdstedelijk Gewest*, Brussel: VUB Press.
- Janssens, Rudi. 2008. “Language use in Brussels and the position of Dutch. Some recent findings”, *Brussels Studies* n°13, 14 p.
- Janssens, Rudi. 2013. *Meertaligheid als cement van de stedelijke samenleving*, Brussel: VUB Press.
- Lambert, André & Lohlé-Tart, Louis. 2010. “Combien de Bruxellois flamands aujourd’hui et demain dans la region de Bruxelles-Capitale?”, Ottignies: ADRASS, juillet 2010.

---

<sup>19</sup> Saraceno (2001), p. 33.

- Marnix de Sainte Aldegonde, Philippe de. 1615. *Ratio Instituendae Juventutis*, Franeker: Sixtus Arcerius, 1615 (edited by Jean Catrysse, Caracas, Universidad central de Venezuela, 1959); French translation: *Traité d'éducation de la jeunesse*, Bruxelles: Editions ARSCIA, 1959.
- Saraceno, Elena (ed.), *Brussels, Capital of Europe*, Brussels: European Commission and Belgian Presidency, October 2001, 140p.
- Van Parijs, Philippe. 2007. "Brussels capital of Europe: the new linguistic challenges", *Brussels Studies* n°6, 10 p.
- Van Parijs, Philippe & Jonathan Van Parys. 2010. "Brussels, capital of Europe: a sustainable choice?", *Brussels Studies* n°38, 13 p.
- Van Parijs, Philippe. 2011a. *Linguistic Justice for Europe and for the World*, Oxford: Oxford University Press; German version: *Sprachengerechtigkeit für Europa und die Welt*, Frankfurt: Suhrkamp, 2013.
- Van Parijs, Philippe. 2011b. "On the territoriality principle and Belgium's linguistic future", in *The Linguistic Territoriality Principle: Right Violation or Parity of Esteem?*, Brussels: Re-Bel e-book n°11, 53-77, [www.rethinkingbelgium.eu](http://www.rethinkingbelgium.eu); shortened in *Belgium Quo Vadis?* (B. Cantillon & al. eds.), Antwerp: Intersentia, 2012, 31-56; Dutch version in *De internationalisering van de Vlaamse rand rond Brussel* (J. Degadt & al. eds.), Brussels: ASP, 2012, 182-210.
- Van Parijs, Philippe. 2012. "Is a Binational Democracy Viable? The Case of Belgium", in *Nationalism and Binationalism: The Perils of Perfect Structures* (A. Shapira, A. Yakobson & Y. Z. Stern eds.), Brighton: Sussex University Press and Jerusalem: The Israel Democracy Institute.

## Appendix

The five graphs in this appendix sum up the present situation as documented by the 2012 Eurobarometer data base. They provide, for each of the main languages in terms of competence (the top twelve in EU27, the top eight in Belgium and its regions) and for the population as a whole (all age groups in the sample),

- (1) the proportion of respondents who say that it is their mother tongue (in dark), and
- (2) the proportion of respondents who say that it is not their mother tongue but that they speak it well enough to be able to hold a conversation in it (in a lighter shade).

**As mother tongues** (with only one choice for each respondent), the top three languages are in the European Union: German-Italian-English;  
in Belgium: Dutch-French-Arabic;  
in Flanders: Dutch-Arabic-Turkish;  
in Wallonia: French-Italian-Arabic;  
in Brussels: French-Arabic-Turkish.

**As learned languages** (i.e. not the mother tongue but claimed to be spoken well enough to hold a conversation), the top three languages are in the European Union: English-French-German;  
in Belgium: English-French-Dutch;  
in Flanders: English-French-German;  
in Wallonia: English-Dutch-French;  
in Brussels: English-Dutch-French.

**In terms of overall competence** (mother tongue or learned), the top three are in the European Union: English-German-French;  
in Belgium: French-Dutch-English;  
in Flanders: Dutch-French-English;  
in Wallonia: French-English-Dutch;  
in Brussels: French-English-Dutch.

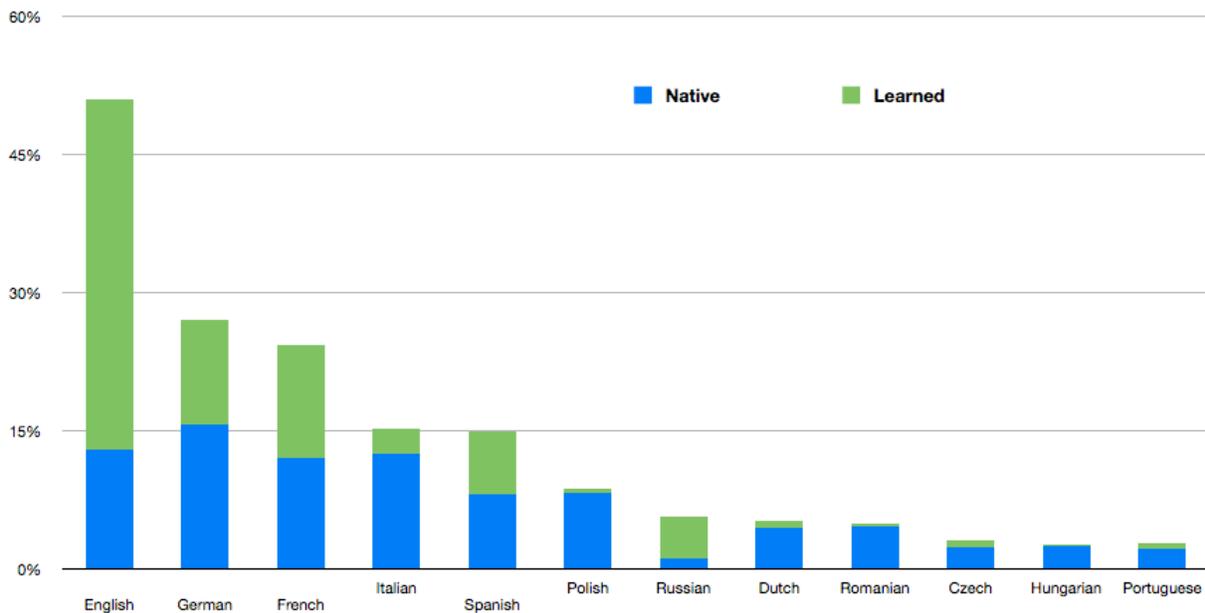
**Do bear in mind** that the smaller the samples (from about 26000 for EU27 to about 100 for Brussels) — however carefully stratified and weighted — the less firm the conclusions that can be drawn for the population as a whole, especially where small percentages are concerned.

**The Eurobarometer data** also provide other relevant findings. For example, among areas where Dutch is not an official language, Wallonia is by far the place where Dutch is best known as a non-native language (with 18.7%, before Luxemburg with 3.2%, West Germany with 1.6% and

Denmark with 0.5%). And among areas where French is not an official language, Flanders is by far the place where French is best known as a non-native language (66.9%, before the Netherlands with 28.9%, the UK with 19.3% and Romania with 16.8%). Further, as regards mother tongues, Belgium is the top country for Arabic (3.2%, before France with 1.8, Cyprus and Sweden with both 0/8%) and the third country for Turkish (with 1.9%, after Bulgaria with 3.8% and West Germany with 2.8%, and before Austria with 1.6%). For a user-friendly presentation of this sort of data (including with a decomposition by age groups that makes it possible to detect trends), see [www.languageknowledge.eu](http://www.languageknowledge.eu).

### Graph A1

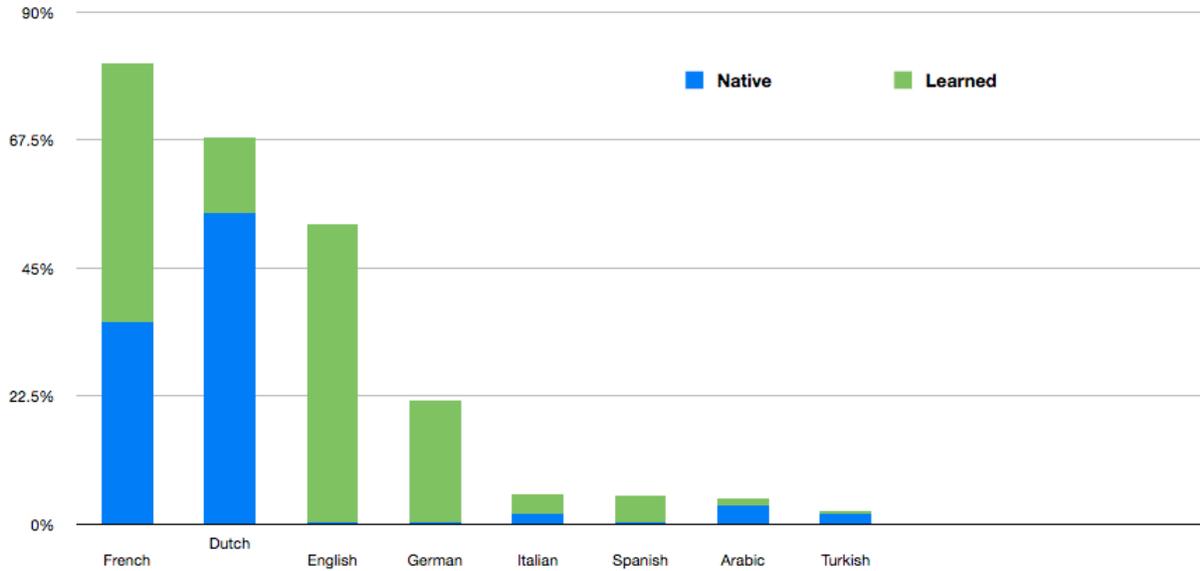
**EU27: Main languages, native and learned (2012)**



Source: Database Eurobarometer 2012. Data processing and graph: Jonathan Van Parys

### Graph A2

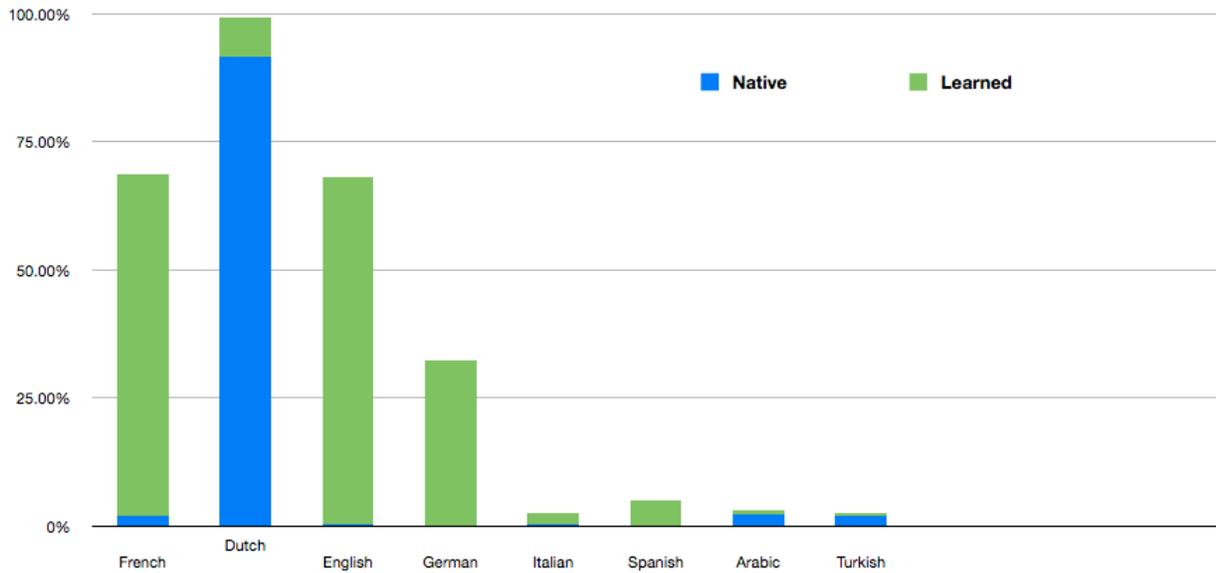
#### Belgium: Main languages, native and learned (2012)



Source: Database Eurobarometer 2012. Data processing and graph: Jonathan Van Parys

### Graph A3

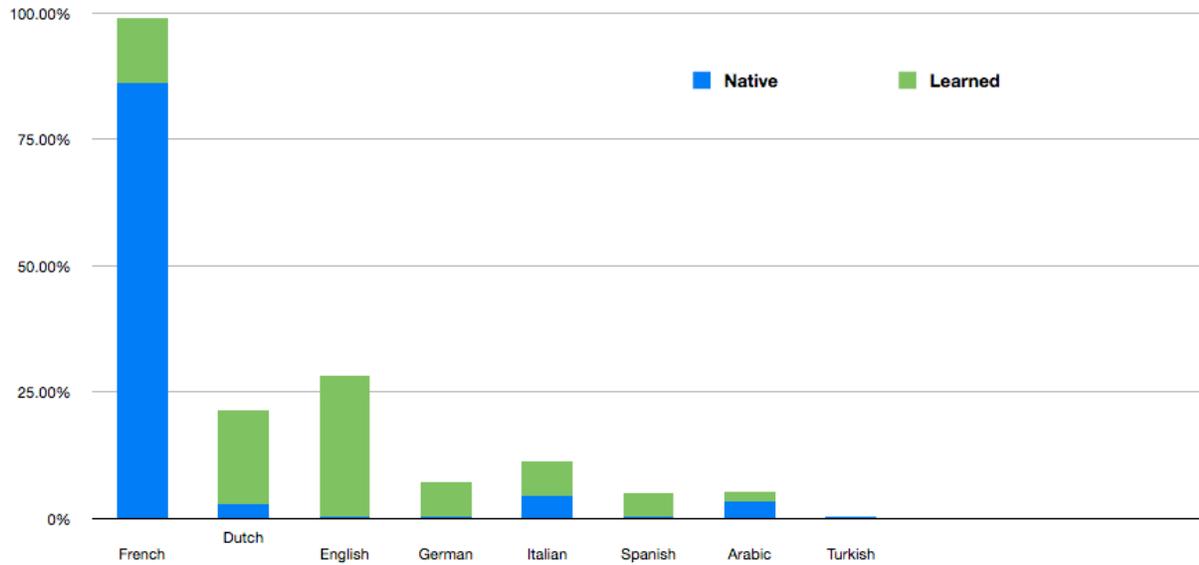
#### Flanders: Main languages, native and learned (2012)



Source: Database Eurobarometer 2012. Data processing and graph: Jonathan Van Parys

**Graph A4**

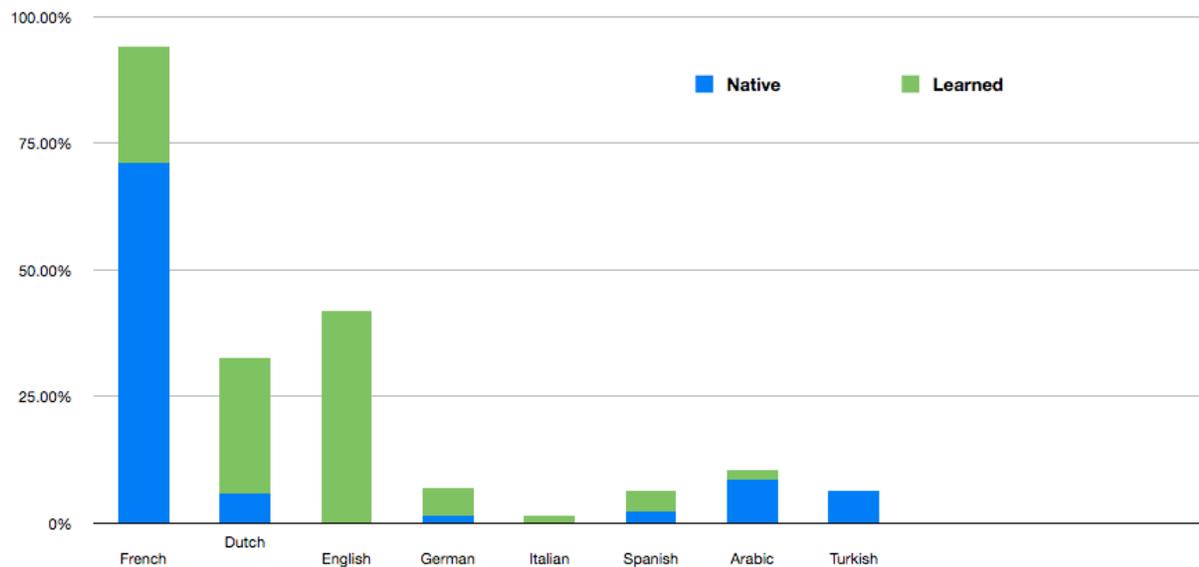
**Wallonia: Main languages, native and learned (2012)**



Source: Database Eurobarometer 2012. Data processing and graph: Jonathan Van Parys

**Graph A5**

**Brussels: Main languages, native and learned (2012)**



Source: Database Eurobarometer 2012. Data processing and graph: Jonathan Van Parys