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Heritage & Family Languages in French-speaking Belgium: Issues of Legitimacy and Integration

Gilles Forlot, Institut national des langues et civilisation orientales (INALCO - Université Sorbonne Paris Cité, Paris) & Silvia Lucchini, Université catholique de Louvain (Louvain-la-Neuve)

Abstract

The article presents some of the results of a sociolinguistic research on the multilingual practices and representations of Francophone Belgians of immigrant descent. We focus on the perceived relationships between bi- or multilingualism and social integration or, conversely, marginalization. The study reveals that for our participants, there is no contradiction between the legitimate and necessary command of the French language in Francophone Belgium and their wish to see the language(s) of their parents preserved and practiced in the private sphere. Rejecting the idea that language maintenance has anything to do with a reluctance to integrate oneself, the participants articulate the status they give to languages and bilingualism and the way they regard the question of integration. Focussing more specifically on linguistic practice, ideologies and bias, the respondents assert that postmigration identities are necessarily built on the premise of plurality and on the condition that social integration can be experienced in positive terms.

Keywords: Belgium; French as a common language; heritage languages; language maintenance; social integration

Résumé

Cet article présente les résultats d'une recherche sociolinguistique menée sur les pratiques et les représentations plurilingues de Belges francophones issus de l'immigration. Notre étude porte sur la façon dont les participants perçoivent la relation entre le bilinguisme ou le plurilinguisme et l'intégration sociale ou, à l'inverse, la marginalisation sociale. La recherche met au jour l'absence de contradiction, pour les informateurs, entre la maîtrise du français en Belgique francophone, qu'ils conçoivent comme nécessaire et légitime, et leurs aspirations à voir la ou les langues de leurs parents préservées et pratiquées dans la sphère privée. Alors qu'ils rejettent l'idée que la rétention linguistique serait liée à une réticence à s'intégrer socialement, les participants de l'étude mettent en relation le statut qu'ils accordent aux langues et au bilinguisme et la façon dont ils se conçoivent l'intégration sociale. En mettant en relief notamment la question des pratiques, des idéologies et de la stigmatisation linguistiques, les répondants soulignent que les identités post-migratoires sont nécessairement construites sur des bases plurielles, mais qu'elles le sont aussi à la condition que l'intégration sociale soit vécue de façon positive.

Mots clés : Belgique ; Français langue commune ; langues d'origine héritées ; rétention linguistique ; intégration sociale

1. Introduction

The aim of this article is to provide some of the findings of an analytical research carried out at the end of the 2000s on the way social actors connect the role of language practice and social integration in Belgium. The research this article draws on is based on fieldwork made up of 65 semi-guided extensive interviews done in the two French-speaking regions of Belgium, i.e. Wallonia and Brussels. Our

approach has been emic (Headland, Pike, & Harris, 1990) and qualitative, i.e. geared to the analysis of discourses on language behaviors in a micro-sociolinguistic and ethnographic perspective. The participants were Belgian citizens born of immigrant parents from some twenty different origins, mostly from Morocco, Italy, Turkey, and Sub-Saharan Africa, which reflects the immigration patterns of both the Brussels and the Walloon regions.

The purpose of the research was to understand the connections between language use, practice and construals and the way individual integration and group identity are articulated and conceived by the social actors under study (cf. Berry, 1990; Van Tubergen, 2006). In this article, language use refers to all the languages composing the multilingual repertoires of people whose parents (or grand-parents) were immigrants. Besides some of the idioms present in the Belgian linguistic landscape, such as French, Dutch and nowadays English, we focus on what we called heritage languages, even if they are often partially inherited (Merle et al., 2010). These languages can be local regional linguistic forms (e.g. Sicilian or Moroccan Colloquial Arabic) and/or standard heritage languages (e.g. such as Italian or Standard Arabic), as well as French – or the regional languages of Wallonia, i.e. Walloon and Picard – as the 'host' language(s). The way integration can be ‘felt’ and then worded by the interviewees led us to broadly interpret the notion of integration as the process of integration to French-speaking Belgium, but also the quest for heritage identity, be it reconstructed or imaginary (Anderson, 1983; Coupland, 2010) within the circles of what is recognized as the 'community'.

The present research project originally aimed to unveil the systems of representations underpinning these practices, i.e. the status and the values of various languages, the feeling of (not) belonging to one or several communities and the affects linked to language practices in post-migration contexts, with a focus on Francophone Belgium (Hambye & Lucchini, 2005; Lucchini et al., 2008; Lucchini & Forlot, 2010; see also Hambye & Siroux, 2008; Hambye, 2009).

2. Literature review

The links between language development, bilingualism or multilingualism, migration, and ethnicity have attracted much attention in scientific research for more than half a century. Initially, researchers focussed on the way migrants and their offsprings witnessed language change (Weinreich, 1953; Haugen, 1953). Issues of language attrition were subsequently investigated (Clyne, 1982; Weltens, de Bot, & Van Els, 1986; Seliger & Vago, 1991), often theoretically underpinned in psycholinguistics, thereafter producing a body of work mostly focussed on the factor of psychological instability and disturbance created by international mobility.

With the gradual acceleration of transnational contacts at the turn of the 21st century (Glick Schiller, Basch, & Blanc-Szanton, 1992; Appadurai, 1997) and the growing awareness that globalization is a key feature of our modern societies, the conceptualization of multiculturalism evolved towards what some scholars have called forms of 'super-diversity' (Vertovec, 2007; 2010). Some publications have been intrumental in its interpretation in the area of (socio)linguistics (see in particular Blommaert & Rampton, 2011; Arnaut et al., 2016). In most cases and contexts, language diversity has been studied in urban settings, mostly due to the fact that renewed social and language contacts linked to international mobilities have happened in cities (cf. Byrd-Clarke, 2009; Pennycook, 2015 for recent developments). In French-speaking literature, this gave rise to a renewed form of urban sociolinguistics (Calvet, 1994; Bulot, 1999; Bulot & Messaoudi, 2003), in which language, urban architecture and spatial divisions are intertwined and make sociolinguistic sense. The notion of family language policy has recently been investigated as well (Spolsky, 2004; Haque, 2019), showing that much is at play

within the family setting in the development of the relation between languages and identities in migration contexts.

As mentioned supra, the integration of migrants and their children has attracted the attention of sociologists (cf. the 'Chicago school') and linguists for almost three quarters of a century. A great deal of recent research is still devoted to the topic of integration and its ties to language use and maintenance, be it in North America (e.g. Portes & Rumbaut, 2006), in Australia (Pauwels, 2004; Clyne, 2005), in Europe (Heckmann & Schnapper, 2003) and in the French-speaking world (Lucchini, 2006; Chiss, 2008; Castellotti & Huver, 2008; Fibbi & Matthey, 2010; Auger, 2014). The debate on the role of language in the insertion of migrants is on-going, and issues of heritage language education have been questioned, particularily in terms of how they relate to identity construction and differ from mainstream first, second or foreign language learning and teaching (see Leeman, 2015 for the US context; Trifonas & Aravossitas, 2014 for Canadian and Australian situations; Bertucci, 2007 and Lucchini, 2007, respectively in the French and the Belgian contexts). In public debates in Francophone countries such as Belgium and France, language learning is often perceived as a prerequisite to social integration (Hambye & Romainville, 2015), while our research shows that it is also integration which creates the conditions of language learning.

Recent psycholinguistic research has also shown that the learning, speaking and maintenance of heritage languages come with a significant level of anxiety experienced by second or third generation speakers (McIntyre, 1999). This anxiety may be linked to the perceived competencies speakers have of their own performance (Sevinç & Dewaele, 2016), or to the negative image they fear they convey to native speakers when they express themselves in their heritage languages (Sevinç & Backus, 2016). Though situated outside the sociolinguistic scope of this article, language anxiety is undoubtedly an important aspect of the attitudinal changes that occur between immigrant speakers and their descendants when it comes to both heritage language maintenance and local majority language production.

A commonsense belief questioned in our research is that of the so-called language disadvantage citizens from migrant parents' experience compared to those raised in non-migrant families. Indeed, the pervasive suspicion about the supposed inferior competencies of second-generation pre-university students has been debunked in some scholars' work on second generation Turkish descendants in France (Gonac'h, 2009; Akinci, 2012).

The overall aim of this article is to clarify how second and third generation 'migrants' in French-speaking, multicultural Belgium relate integration to language development, practice and competencies. It shows that among our sample of informants living in French-speaking Belgium, almost all participants regard themselves as legitimate Francophones, that they value French as a daily language, that they also value the maintenance of a heritage language, even if some of them acknowledge their regrets not to have been competent enough to do it.

3. Geographical and sociological contexts

Belgium is a federal state in which language has long been a national issue. Since the 1990s, the country is a federation divided into three geographical regions (Brussels Capital Region, Flanders and Wallonia) which only partially overlap the three official 'communities' (the French speaking community, the Flemish community where people speak standard Dutch as well as various Flemish dialects and the minority German-speaking community (75,000 citizens), located in the easternmost part of Wallonia, on the border Belgium shares with Germany.

The administrative region of the capital city, Brussels, is officially bilingual, although situated on the territory of Flanders and despite the fact that approximately 80 % of Brusselers are French speakers. Brussels, more than any other Belgian city, is also multilingual, not only because of the variety of its migrant population, but also because it serves as the administrative capital of NATO and of the European Union, thus attracting numerous and multilingual workers from all over the continent (see Francard, 1995; Hambye, 2009).

Our study focusses on the French speaking parts of the country, i.e. Brussels and the region of Wallonia. Until the 1980s, the latter was a mining region and attracted a large Italian population (Dassetto, 1991; Morelli, 2004), estimated to 300,000 people at the beginning of the 2000s (Perrin & Poulain, 2002), while Brussels welcomed people from more diverse geographical origins, with Turkey and Morocco as the main providers of migrants (Manço, 1999; Crutzen & Manço, 2003).

4. Methodology

Semi-structured interviews were carried out over a period of eight months in 2007 on the basis of a seven-topic questionnaire allowing us to collect general and more specific, personal information on the interviewees' trajectories and backgrounds, as well as their social representations of different languages, including their (so-called) heritage languages and French. All interviewed were recorded and transcribed or partially transcribed. The seven themes of the interview were the following:

(a) migration trajectories;
(b) language practices and values attributed to each spoken language;
(c) perceived heritage language competence and use;
(d) perception of multilingualism as a social phenomenon in their neighborhood and in Belgium;
(e) feelings regarding the way they learned French;
(f) issues of linguistic norms;
(g) perceived links between languages and academic or professional success.

At the time of our fieldwork, 39 of the participants inhabited the Brussels administrative region, while all the 26 others lived in the Wallonia region, more specifically in the cities of Charleroi (12), Liège (5), Namur (5), La Louvière (3) and Mons (1). They came from 19 different national origins, which were chosen because they tend to reflect the first and second generations migration patterns of present-day francophone Belgium: 18 and 15 of them were respectively from Moroccan and Italian extractions, and 11 were from Turkish descent. The others identified their background in Subsaharan Africa (6), Latin America (4), Spain (3), Eastern Europe (2), the Middle East (2), and Southeast Asia (2).

22 informants belonged to the first generation, which in our definition corresponded to people having settled in Belgium after the age of compulsory schooling (six years old). The rest of the sample was divided between 38 second generation participants (people born in Belgium or having migrated before the age of six) and five third generation informants (i.e. whose parents were both second generation Belgians). The objective of these artificial divisions was to study the possible similarities or discrepancies within the discourses of the different generations.

Additional features of the sample include the following: there were 33 men and 32 women, two-thirds of the participants (41) were 30 to 49 years old and 46 of them have at least graduated from secondary school.

5. Results

5.1 Language dominance and precedence: the case of French

Our study revealed that most of our informants acknowledge French as their native language, or at least one of the native languages. This matter of fact appears to be related to the degree of command of the French language and/or the quantity of that language spoken in their daily lives, rather than to some essentialist considerations on inherited backgrounds, whereby people often claim that "Walloons speak French, Flemings speak Flemish…". The following two excerpts illustrate that stance:

Excerpt 1

Q.: where would you place French in your multilingualism?

A.: at the top place

Mrs BANU, Brussels, Turkey, 2g, 41, school mediator, SHL (Turkish)[1]

Excerpt 2

Int : I don't have an African accent / and I speak / well I'd say I speak perfect French / so much so that often it happened that I have people on the phone and when I look for a job or for an apartment, people change completely (...) if you don't see me, if you only hear me, well you could take me for a Belgian or a Frenchman, at least someone of Francophone origin

Mr MABO, Brussels, Cameroon, 1g, 29, unemployed, RHL (Basaa)

What is illustrated here is that not only resisting the majority language in a French-speaking Belgian environment is virtually impossible, but also that since the informants conceive French as part and parcel of their multilingual repertoires, it is not an objective to resist it. However, most participants also explain that they have had to deal with the contradictory strategies utilized in their families, consisting on the one hand in heritage language practice for the retention of a heritage culture, and on the other hand efficient French language learning in view of what they perceive as appropriate integration into Belgian society. Most behaviours are nevertheless built not so much on explicit identity strategies as on trajectories shaping each migrant's language learning and practice processes, as the following testimony suggests:

Excerpt 3

Q: when you were together, in your family, what language did you speak?

R: at home, the dominant language was Polish until, I'd say, I was a teenager and then as my parents had to deal with more and more bosses who spoke French and because my father also became his own boss in a small painting business, they quickly had to know how to speak French in its written form to write bills or draw up estimates. So, we started to converse in French since Dad had to get by in that language

[1] The interviewer is identified in those transcription as Q. The participants, identified as A., were given fictitious four-letter names. A number of details are also provided: the Belgian city where they live, their country of origin (or that of their family's origin), the generation they belong to (1g, 2g or 3g standing for 1st, 2nd or 3rd generation), their age at the time of interview, their occupation and finally some information as to whether they speak a regional (RHL) or a standard (SHL) heritage language, indicated between brackets at the end of the line. Our choice was to consider any linguistic form without an official status in the country of origin as a Regional Heritage Language (e.g. Italian dialects, North African dialectal/colloquial Arabic, Berber, Aramaic, Creoles, Subsaharan African languages…). The conventions for punctuation are the following: / is a short breathing break; // is a longer break; /// is a silence.

Mrs CIMI, Brussels, Poland, 2g, 54, school mediator, SHL (Polish)

Language practice is thus often geared to instrumental needs, as excerpt 3 shows. Mrs CIMI explains that her father's business allowed her family to climb the social ladder, but this implied the appropriation of extended written French competencies, which in turn was interpreted by her relatives as implying a necessary switch to the majority language.

The difficulties in learning or in speaking the heritage language are often emphasized, but it is often felt that putting some effort in learning one's heritage language could be reinforced, if not replaced, by other forms of cultural practices connected to the origins, such as music, food, clothing, religion and so on. Therefore, it is not surprising that participants indicate that French is their major daily language, since their heritage languages are not practiced in the complete spectrum of social contexts.

As Fishman (1991) and other research have shown, the family is the main locus where the future and the development of each heritage language is being played. This accounts for the fact that learning and teaching the heritage language is often hindered by (a) the omnipresence of French, even in the family context (cf. ethnically or linguistically mixed families), (b) the difficulty to create spaces dedicated to heritage language (without producing a climate of constraint), and (c) the feeling that one does not have a good command of that language. The following testimonies illustrate this frequent situation:

Excerpt 4

R.: Together with my brothers and sisters we speak a lot of French but it's true I realize that we're using a lot of French // I have a son who's five years old and I should make an effort (…) when I speak Arabic to him he says "I don't understand very well" (…) It's true we were born here so French has become the native language / that's good for French but a pity for Arabic

Mrs RYZI, Brussels, Morocco, 1g, 39, school mediator, RHL (Moroccan Arabic)

Excerpt 5

R.: it was very difficult for me to pass on my heritage language / my wife sometimes makes the comment "you speak too much French to the children" / but hey / I learned it like my children and I'm in a tight corner with this

Mr MOIT, Brussels, Morocco, 1g, 49, bus driver, RHL (Moroccan Arabic)

Excerpt 6

Q.: you have two young daughters. Do you teach them your heritage language?

R.: well at the beginning when they were very young and I looked after them I spoke to them in Spanish in Castellano and my husband only in French and when she started going to the day-care centre er and she was immersed in French / I had the impression / when I picked her up her in the evening / and I spoke to her in Spanish / that she didn't understand me as easily as when I spoke French // so gradually I started to speak more French than Spanish to her / because it was easier (...) I try to teach her the Spanish language but it is not easy

Mrs VAAR, Brussels, Chile, 2g, 29, architect, SHL (Spanish)

5.2 Heritage languages (HL) practice vs community withdrawal

Linked to this issue is another important question. Almost all of our participants regarded migration languages as a private matter, and considered that they should be kept for the family circle, and that

for the same reason only French – as well as Dutch in Brussels – are legitimate for communication within the public sphere.

This entails that their multilingualism is bound to be balanced on an unequal basis, since the practice of languages is not only linked to the contexts in which they are spoken, but also on another layer of separation between private circles (family and 'community') and the public sphere (school, all state matters, leisure time outside the home…). Most of our participants rejected the idea of HL teaching in schools, as for a majority of them all language learning must remain subordinate to that of the host society language (i.e. French). The next extracts are examples of such positioning:

Excerpt 7

Q: would you find it normal if schools offered heritage language classes?

A: it has nothing to do at school / the mother tongue has to be used at home with the family

Mr. JEGA, Brussels, Spain, 2g, 43, unemployed, SHL (Spanish)

This can also be accounted for by the fact that some of them do not feel they possess an appropriate command of standard French or at least that such linguistic command is not obvious for them. But above all, their reluctance to the development of heritage language classes in mainstream schools has to do with issues of social cohesion, as our interviewees envisioned problems of withdrawal into one's community or possible issues of segregation and ghettoizing. What our fieldwork reveals is how uncomfortable the participants are with the ambiguous place HL would take in the already intricate linguistic and political situation of Belgium. The three following interviewees word their feelings towards the question of introducing heritage language as medium of mainstream education in Belgian schools:

Excerpt 8

R: well I believe that since we are in Belgium / schools must offer the courses entirely in French and have maybe one or two hours in Arabic or Turkish that's okay / but everything? / no not at all / I don't see that it's of any use to have all their education in their languages because French should dominate / in my opinion

Mrs MAVA, Charleroi, Italy, 2g, 59, unemployed, RHL (Sicilian)

Excerpt 9

R: if you start implementing Turkish classes / then you need to do the same with Arabic Spanish Italian and so on. Do you realize? There would be no more French!

Q: so, do you think it is a private matter?

R: yes indeed

Mrs NUTA, Charleroi, Turkey, 2g, 39, factory worker, SHL (Turkish)

Excerpt 10

R: no not really / I live in Belgium

Q: Yes of course / but I mean for your children / would you be ready to put them in a school offering the public curriculum in Turkish?

R: but I live in Belgium / it depends on the programme // but since you're asking me the question personally / what would be the impact of my kids taking a Turkish language curriculum? / they don't live in Turkey I don't know if it's part of their project to go back to Turkey / they live here / in Belgium / they

> were born here / they are Belgian citizens / they are not naturalized Belgians like me (…) so all this background is important
>
> Mrs FATE, Brussels, Turkey, 2g, 38, school mediator, SHL (Turkish)

Introducing HL education in schools would only, for most of them, be possible under the condition that they should not go beyond the level of introductory classes, that they by no means become the vehicle of fundamental, mainstream education. Mrs Kibi puts it this way:

> **Excerpt 11**
>
> R: well if they have the time (to learn a heritage language) well of course it could be interesting / but sometimes there isn't enough time to deal with the fundamentals and you can also do that at home // okay if there was some way to introduce an extra lesson in heritage language why not?
>
> Mrs KIBI, Namur, 1g, Bosnia, 28, Railway Company Attendant, SHL (Bosnian)

In the eyes of the respondents, introducing heritage language classes here and there, for a limited period of time, could be possible, but all of people interviewed, however active in their ethnic communities, set store by the fact that French should remain the language of instruction in Wallonia and Brussels Francophone schools. They claim that it is also important to ensure there is adequate time to acquire what they consider as the school basics. In the two regions, French is always legitimized in this fundamental instructional role, for reasons which are both education and integration-related.

5.3 HL and questions of integration

5.3.1 Defining integration

The concept of integration raises complex issues and heated debates, not only because of its topical nature, but also because academics and politicians do not agree on a single definition. For the sake of simplicity, we have resorted to the term 'host' (e.g. host language, host society) although we are well aware that this dichotomy between what is called 'host' and 'origin' tends to simplify social reality, even more so in transnational, globalized contexts. We have chosen to look upon integration as the participation of individuals in the host country's social life, particularly in areas of education, employment, cultural life, etc. Taking part in such a way requires some forms of adaptation of each individual to the practices and norms of the host group. It also calls for an evolution of the social structures towards the provision of an increased access of social actors and minority groups to a variety of social activities (such as those mentioned above) while respecting and recognizing the diversity of their values and viewpoints (Taylor, 1992; Schnapper, 2007; Kymlicka, 2007).

5.3.2 Disconnecting heritage language practice from integration process

We said earlier that French is seldom in competition with migration languages, either in the area of daily practice or in terms of status. For many, speaking one's heritage language is not perceived as a marker of defiance towards the host country or a sign of a failed integration. Here is what one of the interviewees has to say when we ask him whether speaking an HL equates with the reluctance to integrate:

Excerpt 12

R: not at all because I think I am a good illustration of what integration is and I think that having a good command of my heritage language has never hindered my integration / there are other factors we could mention but not language

Mr SAKO, Brussels, Turkey, 1g, 39, city councillor, SHL (Turkish)

If the participants are well aware that integration to Belgium's larger cities never goes smoothly and self-evidently, a majority of them claim that maintaining an HL is by no means a sign of a lack of integration. They point to the fact that responsabilities in this matter are shared. Individuals have a responsibility in terms of what they consume culturally speaking – for instance, satellite or cable TV broadcasting in migration language are often pointed at. Meanwhile, local institutions (schools, municipalities, employment offices, etc.) are identified as not making adequate efforts to curb rampant segregation, notably in public schools where pupils are gathered mostly on an ethnic basis, thus producing effects of cocooning and creating what people are now used to calling 'garbage schools', or speaking of the neighborhoods themselves, 'ghettoes' (cf. Verhoeven, 2003)

5.4 HL as a capital?

The results of our findings show that heritage languages take on a variety of roles, ranging from ethnocultural symbolism to intra-community and family communication, while being identified as heuristic tools leading the development of multilingual competencies as well. We develop these various roles in the following sections.

5.4.1 HLs as emblems of an ethnocultural identity

Even if such constructs tend to simplify complex ethnocultural ramifications, most participants perceive their use of languages as linked with the identity they associate their origins with. Thius, languages carry as much of a linguistic value as they assume an emblematic function (Blommaert, 2010). Hence the complexity of some multilingual trajectories in diglossic situations. For instance, while standard Arabic is valued as an instrumental language whose learning and speaking allows for communication in the Arab world, it is rarely felt by Morocans (and most Arabs) as their genuine language, as what is spoken is always the local colloquial variant (called *darija* in North Africa, or Dialectal Arabic), not to mention the fact that many Moroccans are Amazigh-speaking.

Each HL comes associated with some subjective values. This explains both the energy put into its learning and the form taken on by the quest for an identity (i.e. what one feels as his/her roots). Similarly, it often relates to the fear of missing something, of experiencing a painful identity 'vacuum'. The following excerpt is a remarkable illustration of that phenomenon:

Excerpt 13

R: Well as I told you / we speak French all the time, and we try to pull ourselves together sometimes and we say let's not forget where we come from (...) listen we have to speak our language / what's going on? / otherwise we'll lose everything as time goes by // in my mind / it's going to be a loss / a psychological loss for our children because they'll have no more er / no more ties

(...) Let me tell you about my case // I always miss my language / personally I don't know / well I do know how to speak the Moroccan dialect but not the Arabic language because you have the dialects and the language / I can neither read Arabic nor write / I feel frustrated / I don't know if there are psychological consequences for me but I always feel this absence / I always feel like learning the language of my origin

Mr. MOIT, Brussels, Moroccan, 1g, 49, bus driver, RHL (Moroccan Arabic)

Mr MOIT does not not consider the practice of the Moroccan *darija* as that of a real, legitimate language. Nor does he legitimize partial competencies (e.g. speaking but not being able to read or write an idiom) as genuine language skills. Let us add that for most participants, one's origins are virtually impossible to deny, as they stand out as obvious, in particular when one belongs to a visible minority, or carries a 'foreign' first and/or last name, or when one engages in non-local cultural practices (gastronomy, religion, clothing…). Thus, one's foreignness emerges and learning and/or practicing one's ancestral language consists in endorsing one's claim for a 'foreign' or at least dual identity. It means as well that one will match this identification (both assigned by the others and asserted by the actors themselves) with the linguistic behaviours associated with it.

Excerpt 14

R: [our heritage language] remains within us / in any case you can't deny your origins / it's part of / for instance / it's part of the actually pretty Italian education I had

Mr. GASA, Liège, Italy, 3g, 22, student, RHL (Sicilian)

5.4.2 HLs as tool of intra-community communication

The symbolic value of a heritage language is sometimes reinforced by its instrumental dimensions, as retaining such linguistic practices enables to maintain the contacts with the community and with the members of the family living in the country of origin.

Excerpt 15

Q: What activities wouldn't you be able to do if you didn't speak your heritage language?

R: None / my heritage language is first and foremost for my family / even if many of them speak French and English so if I couldn't speak Portuguese it would be too much of a problem / but going to my country maybe / living there if I wanted / what activities couldn't I do? / Yes, that would be it / travelling to my own country and not feeling comfortable with the language

Mrs VEDE, Brussels, Brazil, 1g, 54, office worker, SHL (Brazilian Portuguese)

Yet, our study shows that on the whole, this instrumental dimension is rather limited compared to the issues of identity developed above. Most of the respondents claim that should they no longer speak their HLs, it would not have much impact on the instrumental aspects of Belgian life as heritage languages are felt to be legitimate solely in the private sphere.

The instrumental role of language nevertheless reveals why in some complex linguistic situations most interviewees designate the standard vernacular language as their language of origin, while it is often a regional idiom their parents and ancestors spoke.

Indeed, the diglossic situation of some languages produces complex learning and capitalizing strategies: a standard language, with the prestige and international dimensions attached to it, will be able to fulfill more functions in given social settings than a regional one. As mentioned above, our study shows that it is often the case of speakers of Italian & Arabic regional languages (i.e the Italian 'dialetti' and North African Arabic colloquial variants)

Excerpt 16

Q: [at home] did you speak more in Italian or more in Sicilian?

R: well [my mother] speaks both but she insisted on speaking Italian to us / but with her side of the family she speaks Sicilian more often / but to us she spoke in Italian

Q: Do you have brothers and sisters?

R: I have a big brother who's two years older than me

Q : and she always spoke Italian and refused to speak Sicilian

R: no she wanted us to learn proper Italian

Mrs. NEFI, Liège, Italy, 2g, 22 ans, student, SHL (Italian)

In those cases, learning and speaking a language is linked not only to the symbolic identities it goes along with, but also with the symbolic capital one can draw from them. This means that heritage languages are often identified as languages situated within the origins, but not necessarily the languages spoken in the country of origin. There are consequently some cases of substitution for practical, instrumental reasons, mostly in the case of Belgians of Italian extraction – from regional, dialectal to standardardized language practice. In those cases, it would be more appropriate to speak of language and identity reconstruction than of identity construction.

5.4.3 HL as tools towards multilingual competence

HL practice also takes on a variety of additional dimensions, such as the capacity to convey emotions, to create literary forms, or to enrich one's multilingual spectrum. Also, these languages are sometimes associated with the economic and professional potentialities they may offer, which also confirms what we were writing earlier: the most profitable of those heritage languages on the linguistic market (Bourdieu, 1991) are the standard ones, particularly in the current context of globalization, although local, so-called dialectal linguistic forms are useful (practically or symbolically) in some specific ethnic niche marketing areas, for instance Moroccan or Sicilian shops or restaurants.

Excerpt 17

Q : Why is bilingualism an advantage / is it a question of identity / of roots?

R : it's all that / precisely / the expression of sensations / of feelings / it's an asset because knowing an additional language is an advantage / personally culturally and professionally

Mr. MIGO, Brussels, Spain, 2g, 32, scholl mediator, SHL (Spanish)

Finally, multilingualism, or at least the acquisition of a multilingual competence, is perceived as an asset not only for those who are supposed to have that competence, but for Francophone Belgian society as a whole. It is regarded as an enrichment both for the people as well as for the social structures, and as a way of strengthening social cohesion, of broadening the socio-cultural perspective and widening the citizens' perceptions of diversity, difference and otherness.

Excerpt 18

R: keeping your heritage language, on the contrary, is a way to enrich yourself because life is about exchanging with people

Mrs GISA, Mons, Italy, 1g, 63, social work, RHL (Sicilian)

Excerpt 19

R: knowing a language is always a plus, you can meet people, know them better

Mrs CIMI, Brussels, Poland, 2g, 54, school mediator, SHL (Polish)

5.5 Linguistic identities, integration, and exclusion

Social actors always have to position themselves in various social contexts. Finding a place in the context of ethnocultural difference is no exception. In Belgium as in most Western countries, there remain some forms of discrimination between 'native' Belgian citizens and Belgians born of immigrant extraction. As such, the existence of such discrimination issues questions the vast majority of our interviewees on their social and linguistic identity, and the assertion of a dual identity is felt by them and by 'native' Belgians as more or less acceptable and legitimate.

For several of our participants, integration is all too often interpreted in a commonsense manner as a one-way process transforming integration into assimilation. For instance, the interviewees relate the frequent suspicion people have towards HL retention and a type of bilingualism or multilingualism which is not the classical one in Belgium (i.e. French, Dutch, and possibly other Western languages such as English or German). Thus, they often feel compelled to explain their wish to retain their heritage language(s), or to demonstrate their competence in French, in other words to give evidence of an integration to Belgium deemed appropriate. This leads some of them to avoid speaking their heritage language in public for fear of being stigmatized.

The following extracts clearly illustrate the effect produced or felt (see “I noticed things”, excerpt 21; “People look at you funny”, excerpt 21) by our participants when they speak their HL while travelling on Brussels public city buses.

Excerpt 20

R: I was taking a bus and there were only Belgians, I was speaking Arabic with my sister and people didn't like it / that may be one of the reasons why we try to speak French now

(...)

Q: but should people go on speaking their heritage languages?

R: in private yes / to go to school or when you get on a bus / it’s French // you should leave your language at home / in public spaces / it should be French / it’s for other people as well / when you speak their language they understand what you’re saying / I noticed things / where we speak Arabic they are more suspicious

Mme FANO, Brussels, Morocco, 2g, 42, beautician, RHL (Moroccan Arabic)

Excerpt 21

Q: Is it an enrichment to speak your heritage language?

R: yes it’s cool but I don’t like when they speak it too much / too much then I don’t like it (...)

Q: why? (...)

R: well [on the bus] / for the whole ride I mean when you’re on a bus / speaking Aramaic // first of all people look at you funny

Q: but why do they look at you funny? Isn’t it a feeling you have?

R: no / people do look at you funny / they look at you in an odd way

Mrs. CAIR, Brussels, Turkey, 2g, 23, secretary, RHL (Aramaic)

The testimony of Mrs CAIR clearly illustrates the feeling of language anxiety one may develop when speaking one’s heritage language (cf. Sevinç & Dewaele, 2016). Some interviewees even have the

impression that after all living withdrawn in their community, as a form of cocooning, is a way of gaining confidence and feeling protected. These self-marginalization conducts therefore create the conditions for their own reproduction or, in Bourdieu's words, they generate a situation in which the victims of symbolic domination are also the accomplices of their own domination (Bourdieu, 1982, p. 35; cf. also Heller, 2006).

However, with regard to integration issues, the language question seems to have variable significance, inasmuch as a legitimized origin entails the use or at least the learning of an HL. For instance, most Belgians from Turkish extraction we interviewed considered the command of Turkish as essential to the construction of a Turkish identity, be it outside Turkey. Others, conversely, negotiate their origins on the basis of different, renewed language forms (cf. the cases of Italians and Arabs described above) and/or specify cultural practices.

Let us finally mention that when some language uses are delegitimized by the majority on suspicions that one refuses to integrate (or assimilate) to Belgian society, this stigma can sometimes be reversed (Goffman, 1963) and become the very instrument to resist discrimination and assert one's social and linguistic identity. Therefore, heritage language and ethnic cultural practices, while inducing self-marginalization, also fulfill self-protection functions.

6. Conclusion

Our research on language practices and representations among Belgium's French speaking citizens of foreign extraction aims at studying how they perceive the association between social integration and the retention and practice of heritage languages and cultures. When one focusses more specifically on linguistic use, ideologies and bias, one finds out that most respondents feel no paradox in the practice of bilingual – if not multilingual – repertoires. On the contrary, they assert that newcomers' identities are necessarily built on the premise of plurality and on the necessary condition that social integration can be experienced in positive, or additive, terms.

In the meantime, most interviewees reject assimilationist ideologies, yet emphasizing that migration generally implies some forms of adaptation from those who settle (or whose parents settled) in the host country. This leads to a tendency, in their discourse on social integration and language practice, to assign legitimate places for each repertoire: the regional heritage language (e.g. Colloquial Arabic – at times referred to as dialectal Arabic – or Italian regional language such as Sicilian) is always identified as legitimate and often desirable in the private home and community spheres, while a standard heritage language can have the same functions while serving that of community education or traditional practice (e.g. Standard, Classical Arabic, Italian, Turkish…).

The study also shows how identity construction in a post-migration context is tied to the capital generated by the command of several languages, even those rarely used in the public sphere in Belgium. However, the participants' discourses reveal that migration-induced bilingualism is interpreted differently according to various factors, such as the cultures of origin, the possible diglossic status of some immigrant languages and the effects of the private use of the latter on academic success and social integration to the Walloon and Brussels public sphere. For instance, tendencies to ethno-cultural cocooning or ghettoizing are often stigmatized, but also interpreted as ways to prevent cultural, linguistic assimilation and as means to protect oneself from forms of social exclusion coming from Belgians of European extraction.

Last but not least, what needs to be stressed is the quasi-unanimous identification of French as the legitimate public sphere language. Contrary to the illusion conveyed by HL linguistic landscapes and

conversations in foreign languages often overheard in public places, most migrants and their descendants in our study set store by the affirmation that French is the common language of Wallonia and Francophone Brussels.

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